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A LIFE'S ARREARS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

**The Heiress
of Densley
Wold—**

CASSELL & COMPANY, Ltd.,
London, Paris, New York
Toronto and Melbourne





"Four men scuffling in deadly earnest" (see page 278).



A LIFE'S ARREARS

BY
FLORENCE WARDEN

*Author of "The Heiress of Densley Wold,"
"The House on the Marsh," etc.*

WITH FRONTISPICE IN COLOUR BY W. DEWAR

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LONDON, PARIS, NEW YORK, TORONTO AND MELBOURNE

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as it did of a plain skirt of cheap serge and a pale blue flannel which had been cleaned or washed and which had suffered in the process, her whole face and bearing were indicative of a refinement to which the contents and condition of the room also bore witness.

She was a tall, thin woman, who had had a good figure of the slender sort, and who had indeed served for some years as one of the *mannequins* in a smart West End show-room, until the slender figure grew angular and the face fell away and became too haggard and gaunt-looking for its owner to serve longer to show off the "creations" and "Paris models" of the firm which employed her.

Since then Jane Maristow had eked-out an income of only twenty pounds a year by such dressmaking and millinery as she could do at her own little home of one room.

This one room was her palace, her kingdom, her nest, and in its narrow space she had collected all that she held dear in life.

The child of a poor country vicar, who had left her a modest fortune of five hundred pounds and a share of his furniture and effects, Jane Maristow, proud, energetic, and self-respecting by nature, had resolved at once never to go into a state of dependence as a governess or companion, but to eke out her little portion as best she could while leading her own life.

Crowded closely together in her small room were all the relics of her happier days in her father's lifetime that the greed of her only brother—now long since dead—who had taken much more than his fair share of what their father left behind, had allowed her to keep.

Her father's writing-desk stood in one corner, the old cottage piano in another, in a third her little bed and wash-stand stood, hidden behind a screen of embossed leather which had been one of the features of the vicar's study.

Books she had been allowed to take in abundance; but though they looked homely and companionable on the bookcase of plain shelves which she had been suffered to keep for them, they ~~were~~ chiefly theological works of high intention but strictly limited charm, which she loved rather for their well-known outside than for any pleasure or profit that the printed pages afforded.

There was a little hanging shelf, however, which held certain well-worn volumes that were some of her greatest delights. It contained "Lorna Doone," "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," "Adam Bede," George Sand's hyper-sentimental romances in French, Gyp's liveliest novels in the same language, and "Wilhelm Meister," in the original German.

These and a few other volumes quite as oddly assorted, ranging from high-flown romance to most

Jane read the words indicated:—

“Next-of-kin—Maristow. The next-of-kin of William George Maristow, who died in April last in California may benefit by communicating with Messrs. Thompson and Ritchie, Southampton Row, W.C.”

“There, miss,” cried Clara; “that’s your name—Maristow—and it’s an uncommon one, I’m sure. P’raps it’s some relation of yours, miss, and *you* may benefit by communicating with Mr. Thompson and Mr. Ritchie.”

Jane smiled with faint amusement.

“I don’t think those advertisements are ever real,” she said, with an air of superior knowledge.

“Not real! Then what do they put ‘em in for? They have to pay for puttin’ of ‘em in, don’t they?” asked Clara, with an air of great disappointment, for she had thought she was bringing a handsome piece of news to her friend and patroness of the fourth floor.

“Oh, yes. But I mean I think they are only to catch people, and make them pay for inquiries to be made by the people who advertise,” Jane said.

Clara was not satisfied.

“Then don’t you know a William George Maristow of California?” she persisted.

“I had an uncle named William, but that’s a common name,” Jane answered. “I don’t



THE NEXT-OF-KIN

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remember ever hearing that his second name was George, or that he was in California."

Clara frowned thoughtfully.

"And don't you mean to communicate with the people who wrote that in the paper?" she asked, disappointed.

Jane smiled.

"I don't think it would make much difference if I did," she said. "I don't think it would result in anything but my having to pay them for making inquiries. You see how vague it is: just the common name of William and the surname. And no dates or anything definite anywhere."

"Couldn't you go and ask 'em if there was anything to pay, and if there was, come away?" suggested the shrewd little Cockney.

Amused by her persistence, Jane laughed.

"To tell you the truth," she said, "I don't believe lawyers ever do anything except for people who have money. I have none, so I'm not likely to get anything worth having through them."

"But supposing you was to find you had money, belonging to this gentleman who died in California, wouldn't they do something for you then?"

Jane's smile died away.

"It might be worth trying," she said. "But I've only once had anything to do with lawyers,

looked as if not quite understanding whether she were still looking at them, or whether she were translated to another world and looking at something which existed no longer except in her mind's eye.

There they were, the old family relics, the leather screen, the little piano, the high brass fender, the books. All were just as she had left them two hours before.

But what wonderful vision was it that had been opened before her eyes since then?

In the prosaic, not to say dingy, office of Messrs. Thompson and Ritchie there had been unfolded to her a tale which she only as yet half believed.

She had taken the precaution of providing herself before going to the solicitors with proofs of her identity in the shape of books with old names in them, her grandfather's family Bible—luckily discarded by her brother as among those things which he did not want to keep—and some letters of her parents and grandparents.

These, forming very good *prima facie* evidence of her identity, were duly considered by Mr. Ritchie, the partner whom she saw; and after conversing with her and finding in the family Bible an entry of the birth of William George Maristow, which corresponded with his own information concerning the person with whose money he had to deal, he told her certain

details concerning the fortune of the late William Maristow which were so amazing that they seemed to dance in her brain without taking the shape of concrete facts.

For, according to Mr. Ritchie, the fortune left by the late William Maristow amounted to something like sixty or seventy thousand pounds, and it was for this sum that heirs were now being sought.

Without quite realising that she might be entitled to a share at least of this, to her, enormous fortune, Jane did understand that it had been worth while to come to Southampton Row that day.

She took down the instructions of the solicitor as to the means she was to take to obtain clear proof of her identity, and then she went away, after receiving a promise that the firm would communicate with her at an early date.

Now Jane knew enough about her family to be aware that she had no near relations on the father's side, and she could not but know, therefore, that if the William George Maristow, who had died in California, should prove to have been really the uncle she did not even remember, there was a good chance that she would inherit not only a share, but the whole of what seemed to her a vast fortune.

Her brother had left no children, and she had no uncles, or aunts, or cousins left.

married; there is, I think, ample proof of that. And you are, as you believe and as we believe, the only living member of the family of your generation. There can, therefore, scarcely be a relative found as near to him as you are."

Jane considered again.

"And the money will be at my disposal—really at mine?"

"Undoubtedly. There are a large number of securities to be realised according to your direction, and if you choose to put your affairs in our hands, we would advise you as to what to sell and what to keep."

"And what would the income amount to?" asked Jane soberly, still speaking as if there were only a remote possibility of this wonderful thing happening to her.

"Assuming that we were to invest it with due caution, as we should do, I think you might count upon something like two thousand a year."

She was stunned; she did not even draw a long breath or make any remark. Mr. Ritchie went on :

"What I should advise would be to sell some of the highly speculative securities which would yield a fair return at the present moment, and to leave the rest invested as it is. Your uncle must have been a shrewd man, for most of his investments are sound ones."

"Yes," said Jane, almost listlessly.

She could not take it all in even yet.

Once more the lawyer came to practical matters.

"And what sum would you like to have at your disposal now? I will open an account for you at a good bank, so that you can draw at your pleasure. Shall we say five hundred pounds?"

She looked at him almost dully.

"Can I have all that at once?" she said.

"Certainly. You need not draw it faster than you want it. But by the end of another three months there will be a similar sum awaiting your pleasure. Do you see?"

"Yes, I see," said Jane, who had been growing learned in financial matters of late; "interest on the money invested."

"That's it."

Jane frowned deeply, then she said:

"Supposing another and nearer relative were to turn up, and I had to give up the capital; should I be expected to return the interest that I had already had?"

The solicitor smiled.

"No. I'm quite sure that would not be expected. You take it in all good faith, and you have a perfect right to call the income your own until the supposed and wholly imaginary nearer relative appears."

altering her usual plan of walking the whole way back to Soho to save the penny omnibus fare.

And that evening the only thing she did to celebrate the occasion, was to take little Clara out to a shop in the neighbourhood and buy her a pair of the longed-for shoes "with heels," which had been for so many months the girl's ambition.

It used up nearly all the money Jane Maristow had by her; but she never thought of writing to ask Mr. Ritchie for a little more to go on with; she just waited till she took home the work she was doing, and received the pay from the firm for the last piece of work she was to do for them.

CHAPTER II

ON THE VERGE OF TRAGEDY

QUIETLY as fortune had stolen into her life, however, the money soon began to make a difference to Jane.

She went to railway stations and studied the advertisements on the walls and in the timetables, and was appalled at the expense of the journey she had proposed to herself. Not even the knowledge that she would have plenty more, reconciled her for a long time to the tremendous outlay required even by a second-class ticket to the South of France.

She had quite made up her mind to spend only one fourth of her income of two thousand, so that, if at any moment she should be dispossessed by some incident as unexpected as the arrival of the money, she would at least have enough stored up by the end of a year to keep her to the end of her days in what would be sufficient comfort.

She decided to keep on the one room in London while she was away, though the modest

rent of seven shillings a week seemed really a waste of money in the circumstances. But she hated the thought of storing her things; she would not dream of selling them, and they must be dealt with somehow.

Clara, too, would look after them, and was overjoyed at the good fortune of the fourth-floor lodger.

The next thing to be considered was her wardrobe. Jane knew that to be well-dressed was absolutely necessary; and, indeed, she had always had a longing to show the taste she believed she possessed in that direction. But it surprised her to find how painful it was to her to lay out money, now that she had been used so long to counting the pence and to saving in every possible way.

It was a wrench to buy silk for blouses, even at the sales, for which she prudently waited, and where her experience enabled her to buy to the best advantage.

It was torture to have to take a hansom when the number and weight of her purchases made it desirable that she should do so; if she were to bring them home.

She made up for herself half a dozen blouses and two or three handsome new hats; but the price she had to pay, and knew that she must pay, for feathers and velvet and ribbons and quills of the best quality, caused her

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almost as much pain as if it had necessitated her going without food for a couple of days.

This unexpected aspect of her accession to wealth puzzled and alarmed her. Was she grown so mean that she would always suffer like this over expenses which she could now quite well afford?

She hoped not, but did not feel sure.

She was so cool, so experienced in such matters, and so clever with her needle, that she got together a sufficient wardrobe in three weeks from the time of hearing of her good fortune. And in the second week of January, with many misgivings, she set out, having screwed herself up to the point of parting with the amount necessary for her fare on her journey southwards.

She had taken care to get a well-known tourist agency to recommend her to a boarding-house at Monte Carlo where the expenses, which seemed to her enormous, were considered moderate; and so without a friend, without a companion, she ventured forth into the world which was still so new to her.

The journey woke her into some sort of vivid interest in life. She had been to France in her childhood, having spent a year at school there. But that journey had become almost mythical, and this one was, oh! so much longer, so much more exciting in its rush into the unknown.

She was surprised at everything she saw; and

presently she began, with fear and trembling, to enjoy.

The life and colour of the place, when she reached her destination, were bewildering, but they were charming, too. She felt as if she had been transplanted on a magic carpet to a fairy region, where life was not the old grey twilight existence of London and her room on the fourth floor.

Her appearance created some interest in the *pension*. Her tall, thin figure, always neatly and tastefully dressed, though without any sort of ostentation, her pale, thin face, and large, mournful, grey eyes, in which something seemed to be lacking, made people talk about her, and wonder who "Miss Maristow," was, and where she came from.

Although the demon of misery at the expense still pursued her, Jane managed to see something more of the life of the place than she had expected to do. An old English couple, people of modest means themselves, but of gentle manners and cosmopolitan tastes, made friends in the casual way one makes friends while abroad. And with them Jane went, inwardly groaning all the time, to dine and lunch at restaurants and for excursions, which were more peeps into Wonderland.

And when she became used to her novel surroundings, Jane began to observe.

The gaming-rooms filled her with horror.

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It seemed to her, new to all this excitement and yet with her mind well filled with what she had read about the place and its fatal influence, as if a miasmatic atmosphere hung about the beautiful casino and gardens.

She was refused admittance to them on the first time of her going there, her dress not being handsome enough, so her companions told her.

With more heartburnings, she bought herself—at Monte Carlo prices!—a gown of grey silk and a big black velvet hat; into which she cleverly inserted some of her own feathers. This, with a feather boa which cost her a hundred francs and even a tear or two, enabled her to pass muster, and she even felt faint pleasure in noting, as she looked at her tall figure in one of the mirrors as she passed, that her appearance now looked indefinitely distinguished.

In the rooms she noticed, more than once, two figures that attracted her attention and her interest strongly. They were those of two young people, accompanied by a band of conventional papas and mammas, both so handsome and so striking that she looked at them again and again, and fell into the habit of searching for them in any public place in which she happened to be.

The one was a girl of perhaps twenty, very pretty and vivacious, with a certain air of know-

ing well how great her charms were, and with a bearing and manner which showed that she was of the class that considers it confers a favour to lesser humanity by being seen in a public resort.

This girl, as Jane Maristow soon learned from her companions, who, without knowing anybody, knew all about everybody, was the daughter of the Honourable Charles and Mrs. Faringdon, and was a beauty in her third season; she was, they said, looking out for a rich husband.

The second figure, generally seen by the side of the first, was that of a young man of five or six and twenty, or perhaps a little more, whose blue eyes, tawny moustache, and good-humoured manners awoke Jane Maristow's puzzled admiration.

Life seemed such a ridiculously easy, pleasant thing to him; he moved, he spoke, he laughed in such a charmingly irresponsible fashion, with so much gaiety and amiability apparent in all he said and did, that Jane watched him with the interest of a *savant* studying a newly discovered variety of wild animal.

Day after day she saw these two on the promenade at Nice, where she often went with her friends; in the casino gardens at Monte Carlo, in the restaurants of the neighbourhood, or in the casino itself.

Sometimes, indeed, she would see the young man in the casino alone, or the girl with one or both of her parents, and without the young man. But for the most part she saw them together, and amused herself by making fanciful pictures about their future, taking it for granted, as their behaviour entitled her to do, that they were in love with each other, and that, whether their parents liked it or not, they would soon be engaged.

Jane Maristow had been at Monte Carlo nearly three weeks, and had become, with her strange air of being a creature apart, with her reticence and her evident loneliness, an object of the casual talk of the place, when her attention was attracted one evening, as she and her two friends were at the casino, by the sight of the handsome man with the fair moustache at one of the tables.

Her heart went out to him at once. For something had happened to him, she was sure. For the first time since she had come to Monte Carlo his face was downcast and miserable, his eyes anxious and dull, and his whole bearing indicative of some great mental distress.

The girl was not with him, nor was she in any of the rooms, and Jane felt quite strangely anxious about her, and wondered whether the pretty girl had been taken ill, or if she had gone away, or what else had happened.

All the time she was in the rooms Jane worried herself about these two happy young people in whom she had taken an interest, and puzzled herself by speculating what might be amiss. Again and again she stole a glance at the man, and never without noting fresh signs of disturbance and distress.

The incident haunted her; she dreamed that night about them both, and, looking about for them on the following day, grew distressed that she could not meet either of them anywhere.

Then at night, when she went again with her friends to the casino, she saw the man once more, at the tables as before, no longer flushed, as on the previous evening, but pale and heavy-eyed, and bearing still stronger marks than before of stress and strain.

She was fascinated; she could scarcely take her eyes off him. She wondered whether he was losing his money; she wondered again what had become of the girl.

At last she could bear the tension of her feelings no longer, and she went out into the beautiful gardens, excited and unhappy, curious to know what the trouble was which had fallen upon the young fellow who had seemed to her so ideally happy and irresponsible, wishing she dared ask him for his confidence, and longing to know the truth about him and the girl.

These fancies and vague wishes had so taken

possession of her that she wandered about among the beautiful plants and under the dark blue night sky without heeding the fact that she had wandered a long way, or that she had been warned not to walk in the gardens by herself.

It was due to her strangely aloof appearance, and to the fact that she looked much older than she really was, that Jane Maristow had acquired a habit of walking about by herself much more freely than those of her countrywomen whom she had met in the South.

She was standing quite still, with her hands clasped, obsessed by the idea that there was something gravely wrong with these people who had taken such a hold upon her fancy, when she heard footsteps not far from where she stood.

Unsteady footsteps they were, which aroused inquiry in her mind at once as to whose they were, and as to the condition of the person who was evidently so near, but whom she could not yet see.

Looking round, she saw whom it was that had attracted her attention, and her breath came fast.

Walking gloomily, at a rapid rate, with one hand in his breast, was the man with the fair moustache. He wore no hat, and though she could not see his face, she knew from his whole bearing that he was still a prey to the distress from which he had been suffering when she saw him at the tables.

An irresistible desire to speak to him, to ask him what was the matter, seized this simple-minded woman. She had taken a step forward with the rash intention of accosting him, when she was struck with horror which kept her for the moment still.

He had taken a revolver from his breast, and was pressing the muzzle against his temple.

With a cry, she sprang forward, and the sound of her voice causing him to move quickly, the revolver went off unexpectedly.

She was close upon him when she heard the report, and at the same moment felt a sharp pain in her left foot.

Without a word, she wrested the weapon from him, just as he uttered a low cry.

“I’ve hurt you!” cried he; and looking down, she saw that blood was coming in a stream through her thin, grey shoe.



CHAPTER III

LOVE'S VAGARIES

But Jane Maristow was not concerned with her own injury. After one glance at the red stain close to her foot, she looked again at the young man, noted the haggard eyes, the trembling limbs, the dazed look on his face.

"It's nothing," she said. "What about yourself?"

The young man had nothing to say. It was evident that he had been on the point of putting an end to his own life, when Jane, by her sudden appearance, her cry and her forward spring, had startled him and diverted his aim.

Now, caught in a cowardly act, dazed, unable at once to return to the level of the ordinary business of life, he stood, shamefaced, before the woman who had, to all intents and purposes, saved his life, and was suffering for what she had done for him.

"I'm—I'm very sorry, very sorry indeed," he stammered at last, looking with heavy eyes into her face.

She tried to smile, but she was, in truth, by this time white and faint, and in great pain.

"It's nothing, nothing," she repeated. "You've given—your promise. Thank God!"

"But I wish you hadn't interfered, all the same," he said, with a sudden rush of different feelings. "You acted with the best intentions, but you've done no good to me. I am at the end of my tether, and the best thing for me to do would be to blow my brains out, as I intended to do, and would have done but for you."

"You have ruined yourself—at the tables?" asked Jane point-blank.

"There and—in other ways. But let us think of you. Let me fetch help."

But still she clung to his arm, detaining him.

"Tell me more first," she said. "You owe that to me. Tell me what you did this awful thing for. Perhaps I could help you. I make no apology for asking. You have been too near death to mind my speaking frankly to you, I should think."

Driven by the dignity which her simple earnestness gave her, and by the straightforward honesty which seemed to him to be the most striking thing about her face, he said, in a low voice, as if much ashamed of himself:

"This is in confidence, of course. You don't know my name—I don't know yours. It is the confidence of two strangers. I came here with

the hope of making money, because I am passionately in love with a girl whom I couldn't hope to marry without money. She threw me over two days ago, and I've gambled away my last penny since. Do you see? I'm ruined, done for every way. So you've done me no good by your kindness. There: you wanted the truth. I've told it."

Jane listened in deep interest.

"In love!" she said musingly. "You could throw your life away just for that!"

He resented her tone.

"Perhaps," he said curtly, "you don't know what love is."

"I don't," she answered, in the simplest way in the world. "I don't want to, if it makes people so foolish."

He frowned. He was coming back from that high-pitched mood in which she had found him to the manner of ordinary life again, forced back by the straightforward directness of his unknown companion.

"I admit I've been foolish," he said coldly.

She grew humble at once.

"I ought not to say that," she said, "I suppose, as I've admitted I know nothing about those feelings. But I want to make sure—quite, quite sure—that you will pull yourself together and try to get over this; that you will give up gambling if to lose makes you desperate—and

even love," she added, with a faint smile, "if it does the same."

He looked at her less forbiddingly.

"You've been very good to me," he said, "and I must apologise for seeming so ungrateful. But—I daresay you can understand that when a man has got to such a pitch of—of desperation that he thinks of—of doing what I should have done but for you, he isn't quite in the mood to make pretty speeches. Anything like a life worth living is over for me, and my disappearance would be a good thing for everybody."

"No, no, no. I've been the means of preventing your doing something rash and wicked, and I feel as anxious about you as if you were my own relation. I want all sorts of promises from you. Will you give them?"

He smiled now.

"That's a large order," he said; "but you're very good, and I'm grateful. I daresay," he went on, looking with more interest into her worn face, "you have sons of your own—perhaps young rascals like me—who have given you trouble, and so you feel more kindly to other young fools than they deserve."

She looked at him in perplexity. Then, innocent of vanity as she generally supposed herself to be, her face fell.

"Sons!" she repeated. "Do you mean grown-up sons?"

“Oh, I beg your pardon. I was only guessing.
I—I—”

He saw that he had made some great mistake, for she looked quite bewildered. Then, in a low voice, she said simply :

“I've never been married; and I'm only thirty-two.”

In spite of his efforts, the young man betrayed his great surprise, and she realised that he had taken her for a middle-aged woman.

He excused himself with a fair amount of neatness.

“Now that I look at you,” he said, “I see what an absurd mistake I made. But the light was so bad, and young ladies are seldom as self-possessed as you are, that I'm sure you'll forgive me.”

“There's nothing to forgive,” said Jane simply.

Her voice was growing weak, and those were the last coherent words she uttered before her senses abruptly left her, and he saved her from falling to the ground.

Presently Jane was conscious that she was being moved, that people were talking round her; then she grew drowsy again; then once more she heard voices, growing louder and more distinct, till she recognised the voice of Mrs. Clarke, her chief friend at the *pension* where she was staying.

And opening her eyes, she found that she

had been, as it seemed miraculously, transported to her own room at the boarding-house where she was staying, and that Mrs. Clarke and the mistress of the house were in the room, while a doctor was dressing her wounded foot.

"There, there, you'll soon be all right. Never mind a little pain," said Mrs. Clarke soothingly, as Jane winced under the doctor's touch.

The wound she had received was, indeed, not a serious one. But the flesh had been torn away by the bullet, which had gone through her thin shoe, and she had to bear the announcement that she would not be able to walk for some days, or to wear a boot for a much longer period.

When the doctor had gone, the two ladies drew near to her and spoke gentle words, both obviously dying to know something of the circumstances in which she had received her mysterious wound.

But Jane was reticent. She on her side wanted to know something.

Mrs. Clarke was a mine of interesting gossip about everybody, and from her Jane felt sure that she would be able to obtain details concerning the identity of the young man in whom she had from the first been so much interested, and who had now become invested with even more interest in her eyes.

She asked how she came to be brought back to the *pension*.

Mrs. Clarke was delighted to tell her the story, while Madame Robert, the owner of the house, listened and added her comments in voluble French.

It was quite a charming history, indeed !

It appeared that it was Mr. Haldon, one of the smartest set in the neighbourhood, who had brought news of the accident to Miss Maristow ; that Mrs. Clarke had been one of the first people he encountered, so that he found out at once where the injured woman lived.

He and Mrs. Clarke had then at once made arrangements for her removal to the *pension*, after his explanation that the lady had been hurt by the accidental discharge of a revolver which he was examining.

He was inconsolable at what he had done and had gone himself for a doctor, and had not left the *pension* until he was assured that the injury, though a very painful, was not a dangerous one.

"Who is he ?" asked Jane Maristow, when Mrs. Clarke had told her all this.

Her companion was ready with a long, gossipy account of him and his people immediately.

Miles Haldon was one of the younger sons of Sir John Haldon, a baronet, whose seat was in Dorsetshire, and was very well known on the Riviera. He was a spirited young fellow,

Jane Maristow did not, indeed, ignore the fact that it was his losses at play rather than his wounded or disappointed affections which had been the last straw.

But it pleased her to imagine that the reason his losses preyed upon him was that they removed him from the possibility of marrying the girl he loved.

She chose to fancy that the words he had uttered to her concerning his affairs had pointed to that conclusion ; and she felt her heart rise in revolt at the thought that one of her own sex, no matter how beautiful or how much admired, could throw over the man who loved her, and who appeared to have had every right to think that she loved him, because he was not rich enough for her ambitions.

Jane Maristow was disgusted at this trait in the pretty girl whom she had admired at a distance. She told herself that he was well out of such a fate as marriage with a creature so cold, and she longed to see him again, to get him, if possible, to confide in her still further, feeling that she was ready with good advice and sympathy and the sort of motherly kindness which he evidently looked upon as natural to her.

She felt that she wanted to see him again, to touch once more, if it were only the outer fringe, of that full, tempestuous life which alarmed and disturbed her, yet which had for her a charm by its

very contrast to the grey half-lights in which her own dull existence had been passed.

This rush of headlong passion, unwise, reckless, extravagant, was new and strange and fascinating to her. She was appalled to find such impetuous folly in a man whom she had admired, and yet at the same time she felt that she admired him for it, admired him for the mad recklessness with which he had gambled away his money when he was disappointed in love, admired him for his very intensity of despair.

She felt that it was so much beyond her reach, this vehemence of feeling, that it interested her. She began to find herself glowing with vicarious warmth at the fire of life as she thought of the scene of the previous evening, of the passion-tossed man with his face of despair, of the features flushed with deadly excitement, of the voice husky with suppressed emotion.

And she was dreaming of him when she fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV

A BROWN-PAPER PARCEL

IT was some days before Jane Maristow could go downstairs, but each morning Mr. Haldon came to inquire after her, and each morning he brought her some flowers.

Jane Maristow was delighted, touched, puzzled. Was all his despair but a fancy, or a trick to excite sympathy? She was ashamed of herself for the doubt; but it seemed to her prosaic mind extraordinary that a man who had described himself as ruined and done for should be able to send her choice flowers.

To listen to him that night one would have thought he had not a penny in the world!

On the day she came downstairs for the first time, Jane Maristow hoped that Mr. Haldon would hear that she was well enough to be seen, and that he would come in when he called.

But he did not. She saw him arrive, and she listened eagerly for his footsteps outside the door of the small sitting-room, which had

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been given up to her use during her convalescence. But he went away again, and the servant who brought her his flowers had only a message to repeat to the effect that Mr. Haldon was sincerely glad to hear that she was so much better.

Jane Maristow was bitterly disappointed. She was so anxious to hear more about his love affair, to know whether he had got cured of his despair, and whether he was really going to marry the beautiful Miss Faringdon after all.

Mrs. Clarke came in to see her, and brought her the gossip of the place that afternoon.

One item of her budget was full of interest for Jane.

“Do you know, my dear,” said her visitor, “that I met your friend, Mr. Haldon, this afternoon, and that he recognised me and left Miss Faringdon, with whom he was walking, to speak to me about you? I felt quite pleased, for he is really an awfully nice man, and so handsome and amiable, that I felt quite flattered at his remembering me—especially when he was with his fiancée.”

Jane caught at the word.

“His fiancée!” echoed she. “How do you know that?”

Mrs. Clarke seemed taken aback by the question.

“Well, of course, I only know by what people

say," she admitted, surprised at the sharpness with which Miss Maristow spoke. "Of course, I don't pretend to be on intimate terms with him, or that he has taken me into his confidence about it. But it was the talk of the place that he was always about with her until a few days ago, and so people took it for granted that they were engaged. I myself thought so until, as I say, they seemed not to be about together so much. Perhaps I'm jumping too soon to conclusions, of course."

Jane was relieved by this speech. She, who knew more than Mrs. Clarke did about the affair, was aware that Mr. Haldon had been in love with the beauty, and that she had refused him. Now it looked as if they had made it up again, and she was delighted to think that he was going to be happy after all.

Mrs. Clarke smiled at her archly.

"I hope you're not jealous," she said.

Jane Maristow laughed, a most unusual act with her. The absurdity of the suggestion, which was evidently made in all seriousness, was so great.

"In love!" she echoed, with quiet amusement. "I! Why, I've never been in love in my life—not even when I was young!"

And she thought, with a sort of bitterness in her amusement, of Mr. Haldon's ill-concealed surprise when he learned that she was only thirty-two, and of his conjecture that she might be the mother of grown-up sons.

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"Well, keep out of it, my dear, for the rest of your life, if you can," said Mrs. Clarke, with emphasis. "The later you take the disease the harder it is to cure, and though you're not very old, you're past the age when one can treat it as a childish complaint."

Jane smiled rather grimly.

"I know that," she said, "and you may trust me to be careful. The reason why I am interested in Mr. Haldon is quite unconnected with any romantic passion on my part, I assure you."

Mrs. Clarke, who was a kind-hearted old gossip, laid an affectionate hand on her arm.

"You won't think me impertinent, my dear, I hope," she said, "but Mr. Haldon is a very attractive young man, and of a dangerous type."

"Not dangerous to me," said Jane calmly. "I am very much interested in him because he was so kind after the accident. But he has already done more than enough to show his sorrow for his share in it, and you may be sure I shall not trouble my head more about him than is consistent with a perfectly calm frame of mind—and condition of heart."

She was amused at the suggestion that she should be so foolish as to allow herself to "fall in love" with a handsome young fellow like Mr. Haldon. Jane was a prosaic soul, rendered exceptionally matter-of-fact by the conditions of her early existence, and she was in no mood to imperil

seemed suddenly to change his mind, and asked her rather abruptly if he might see her home.

"Perhaps," he said, "I can give you better support than that stick. Let me try."

He gently took the crutch-stick from her as he spoke and, supporting her on one side while Mrs. Clarke remained on the other, he did indeed, as he had said, afford her more help than the stick had done.

When they all reached the door of the *pension*, after having exchanged nothing more interesting than a few desultory remarks about the beautiful weather, Mr. Haldon said :

"May I come in for a few minutes? I should like to be sure, from your own lips, of the extent of the injury caused by my clumsiness."

She invited him in at once, and he followed her into the little sitting-room which was still given up to her.

Here she sat down, looking very pale as the result of her unaccustomed exertion, and she became at once aware, as soon as they were alone together, that her companion, though in a more composed frame of mind than when she had last seen him, was labouring under the excitement of some intense and painful emotion.

For a few moments they said nothing. She was sitting quietly in a low chair, removing her gloves in order to give herself some occupation

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while he collected himself, as she perceived that he had some difficulty in doing.

Presently she looked at him askance, and saw that he appeared to be in some doubt and perplexity.

So she took the initiative and, having recovered a little from the fatigue, which had made her voice hoarse and tremulous and her limbs weak and tottering, she said :

“I’m glad to have an opportunity of asking you if things are going better with you now. I may ask that, may I not?”

There came over his handsome face a look of grave distress and perplexity as he said :

“Thank you. I’m very glad you’ve said that. Circumstances have put you so suddenly in possession of the facts of my position that I feel I can talk to you and consult you, and that you, in your great kindness, will listen and advise me.”

Jane Maristow felt rather overwhelmed by the responsibility suggested by these words.

“I will listen to all you have to tell me with the deepest interest and pleasure,” she said ; “but as for advice, I’m so ignorant, having lived a very secluded life, that I’m afraid there’s scarcely any point upon which I could advise anybody.”

“You’re very sympathetic,” said he, in a frank and straightforward manner which touched her. “Perhaps that fact will make you better able

to advise than you think. At any rate, as I'm in a terribly difficult position, I should like to tell you all about it, if I may."

"Do, do! I should love to think I'm helping you, if only by listening," said Jane gently.

It was, of course, impossible for this sincere, simple woman, used for so long to live her own shut-up life away from human interests and common human feelings, to understand what there was in her that attracted confidence. But to the young man suffering from the pangs of more than one great and bitter disappointment, the sweet, low-toned voice, the absolutely frank expression, of this pale woman with the thin face and the solemn grey eyes gave comfort even without the interchange of words.

"In the first place, then," he said, drawing his chair nearer to hers and instinctively looking round the room to be sure they were alone, "things are no better than they were that night. In fact, in some respects they're worse."

An exclamation of frank dismay broke from Jane's lips.

"Why, they told me—I thought—you've been seen with her—with Miss Faringdon," she said, in deep concern; "so I'd hoped it was all right, and that she'd accepted you."

He shook his head.

"No such luck," said he gloomily. "She's ambitious—must marry money, and I have none.

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So it's all off, if, indeed, it can ever be said to have been on."

"But she encouraged you!" cried Jane, even indignantly.

He looked surprised at her knowledge of this fact, but answered simply:

"Oh, yes, she did. She likes me—likes me very much. But if you knew the world, as you say you do not, you would know that that isn't enough nowadays, if it ever was. You must not only care for a person, you must have money enough to live upon. Now I have nothing."

Jane looked puzzled.

"What are you thinking?" said he.

"Well, I was thinking," she said frankly, "that—that you don't look poor."

He smiled.

"I am, though. My father is not rich for a man in his position—he's a baronet, perhaps you know. That means that he has an estate, not unencumbered by the expenses of those who went before him; and he has three sons, of whom I'm the second, and we've all been brought up 'with extravagant tastes, and don't know how to do anything much except perhaps ride, drive, and spend money. Well, now I'm in love, madly in love with a girl who has much the same history as we have. She's an only daughter, and she must marry money. She knows it herself, knows it better than anyone. So that,

though she does care for me, I think, in fact I'm sure, she won't marry me unless I can manage somehow or other to make money. And the thing's hopeless—absolutely hopeless. I made a desperate attempt to make something at the tables, and—well, you know the result. I've been in the tightest of tight places ever since. Ruby—that's her name—half guesses what sort of accident it was that happened that night, and she's sorry—very sorry; but she can't do more."

Jane frowned.

"Why doesn't she make up her mind to marry you without money?" she said. "Surely, if you're both fond of each other, you might be prepared to make sacrifices!"

He looked at her as he might have done at a child.

"Ah!" he said; "you don't know our world. It's not possible to imagine life all sacrifice, you know, because, for one thing, the consequences affect so many more than just the two persons chiefly concerned."

Jane was puzzled still, but did not like to appear presumptuous in offering advice which appeared to have no chance of being heeded.

"And what are you going to do?" she asked at last abruptly.

He hesitated and looked down, and she could see that he was very much agitated.

"She wants me," he said in a very low voice,

"to do something which I can't bear the thought of doing, something which might make things worse for both of us than they have ever been before. There's just a chance that it might put things right, but—the fact must be faced—it's only a chance, and it's a thing I don't like having to do."

Jane's great grey, solemn eyes were fixed upon him so intently that she seemed to be trying to draw the thoughts out of his mind into hers before he uttered them.

"Is it something you think wrong?" she asked in a downright way.

"Well, it's something that, although I have permission to do it, I'm very, very loth to do. I think the risks of it have been made too little of, and that the consequences of failure haven't been thought out properly. That's what I mean."

Jane leaned forward and put her thin, long-fingered hand upon the young man's arm.

"Then don't do it," she said earnestly. "Don't do it. Have nothing to do with it, absolutely nothing."

He looked up into her face almost meekly, as if he felt relieved by the tone of authority she was taking with him.

"Even if there's a chance—and the only one—of its throwing a little light upon the world for both her and me."

But Jane was resolute.

CHAPTER V

DOUBTS AND PERPLEXITIES

JANE MARISTOW still had breakfast in her own bedroom, the wounded foot entailing a considerable modification of her usual habits. But before the hour of that meal—eleven—she had already received two visits—from Mrs. Clarke and Madame Robert—and it was these ladies who, on the day following the call of Mr. Haldon, brought her the news with which Monte Carlo was ringing.

It had been known in the town on the previous night, but had not reached the ears of the visitors at the modest *pension* of Madame Robert until a few hours later.

When the story came to Mrs. Clarke's ears she was delighted to have such a real tit-bit of gossip to carry to her invalid friend.

It was inevitable that Mr. Haldon's visit and the acquaintance with Miss Maristow, which had been the result of the revolver "accident," should have given all the residents in the house a pleasant sensation of being themselves, if not

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"in the movement," at least in touch with those who were.

For Mr. Haldon was emphatically one of the golden youth of the Riviera, where he and his brothers had for years taken a high place among the lovers and supporters of all kinds of sport.

When, therefore, Mrs. Clarke heard of the loss of some of the jewels of the viscountess, whose family were on intimate terms with the Haldons, she ran with the information to Miss Maristow's room, where she found Madame Robert already installed, retailing, with great enjoyment, the important and interesting news.

Jane, though by no means as deeply moved by the occurrence as her two companions, listened to the details with a proper show of concern.

She was not sure that she had ever seen the viscountess, who was a more recent arrival in the neighbourhood than her sister-in-law and the beautiful Miss Ruby Faringdon.

Viscountess Chilcomb and her husband were people who took a prominent part in the life of the Riviera, however, and Jane had heard as much about them as there was generally to be known.

Mrs. Clarke evidently felt the viscountess's loss as keenly as if it had been her own.

"Fancy, my dear Miss Maristow," she said, in a voice which seemed to be trembling with unshed tears, and which would certainly not

have been so charged with emotion if she had been recording the misfortune of anyone unconnected with the peerage, "there was a pearl necklace worth ten thousand pounds among the things stolen!"

"And that's not the handsomest pearl necklace she has," said Madame Robert, with a feeling that the residence in the neighbourhood of a lady so well endowed shed a little lustre on herself through Miss Maristow's distant acquaintance with these great people. "I believe she has a rope of pearls—fortunately, not among the stolen property—worth twenty-five thousand pounds."

It was a little difficult to follow the excited comments of the two ladies, as the one was English, the other French, each at the same time endeavouring to express herself in the language of the other.

Jane, who was almost as perfect a mistress of French—thanks to the early lessons of her father and her own subsequent visits to France and love of George Sand—as she was of her own tongue, listened and tried to appear deeply interested where she was only amused.

"But there were other things stolen," went on Mrs. Clarke solemnly. "I don't know whether you heard, Madame Robert, that there was an emerald brooch among the things, and that it was valued at four hundred pounds."

Madame Robert was not to be outdone.

"Yes," she said, "and two diamond rings, worth something like five hundred pounds, besides a single stone necklace of large diamonds and another necklace of large sapphires surrounded by diamonds."

Mrs. Clarke looked rather annoyed that she was unable to cap this fresh disclosure by another still more heartrending.

"And how were they lost?" asked Jane politely.

Mrs. Clarke rushed in with the latest details.

"It's only guesswork at present," she said, "but it lies between the people of the hotel and her own servants, I believe."

"Now I heard," said Madame Robert, "that it was supposed to be the work of one of the hotel thieves who are always found at Nice, and from whom," she went on hastily, "Monte Carlo itself is luckily free."

"Do they expect to find the things?" asked Jane.

Her languid interest did not trouble the other ladies, who were enjoying the excitement too much themselves to care greatly whether they bored the invalid or really entertained her.

"I should say it's most unlikely," said Mrs. Clarke.

"On the contrary," said Madame Robert, anxious for the honour of the Riviera, "I think it's most probable they will. Even," she added,

"if they should have to go to Paris or to London before they catch the thief."

"When did it happen?" asked Jane.

"I heard that the discovery was made quite early yesterday afternoon," said Mrs. Clarke.

"Now what I was told was that it was only when the viscountess was dressing for dinner that she missed the things," said the French-woman.

"That was last night, then," said Jane. "So there hasn't been much time lost."

"Oh, but nothing has been found yet," said Madame Robert. "The whole family is engaged in the search and in making inquiries, I understand. For there are not only Viscount and Viscountess Chilcomb, but some of their sons and daughters and the viscount's brother and his wife and daughter, staying at the hotel or in the near neighbourhood; and, of course, as they know everybody in the best society about here, the sensation has been quite general."

Jane lay back, rather bored.

"Robberies of that sort are quite common, aren't they? I mean, one hears of one or two at least every year. Why should they make so much fuss about this one?"

Her hearers appeared to feel rather snubbed by this speech.

"Indeed, robbery is not more common here than it is elsewhere," said Madame Robert, offended.

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"And when it is a question of a lady of family and high position one can't help feeling more interested than one would if it were some *nouveau riche* who had been plundered," said Mrs. Clarke.

A faint smile stole over Jane's thin features. She had carefully avoided any mention of her own recent good fortune, and she passed at the *pension*, with her quiet dress and careful, almost penurious habits, for one of those numerous female connections of the clergy who roam the Continent on a very small settled income, just enough for them to be uncomfortable upon. Both would have been extremely surprised to learn that Miss Maristow herself was one of the newly rich.

"Especially," Mrs. Clarke went on presently, as neither of the others said anything in reply, "since there are rumours about that this is no ordinary robbery."

And she looked with a sort of triumph at Madame Robert, who did not appear to have heard the rumour, and whose looks expressed her natural jealousy of this latest intelligence.

"Why, what is it that they say?" she asked tartly, and with a slight infusion of scorn at the gossip in her tone.

"Well, they *do* say, if something I heard just now can be trusted, that Viscountess Chilcomb's sister-in-law——"

She hesitated just long enough to allow

Madame Robert to utter an exclamation of astonishment.

Then Mrs. Clarke went on:

"Mind you, I say this with all reserve, particularly as Miss Maristow, being a friend of Mr. Haldon's, and he so intimate with the Chilcomb family——"

Jane interrupted quickly, disclaiming the honour thus thrust upon her.

"Indeed, I can't call myself a friend of a person who is only civil to me because I happened to suffer from an accident in which he was concerned," she said.

But this excessive modesty was not pleasing to the other ladies, who felt the reflected glory of the honour they thrust upon her.

"I call a gentleman a friend when he is so assiduous as Mr. Haldon is to you, Miss Maristow," said Madame Robert.

"And of course," said Mrs. Clarke, "I am not insinuating anything, but only telling you the gossip of the place."

"Yes, yes, we understand that. Do go on," said Madame Robert.

"Well, then, the talk is that the Honourable Mrs. Faringdon"—Mrs. Clarke never failed to give everybody his title in full—"is very fond of the tables, and is known not to be too well off. Naturally, at such a time, all sorts of things get said, and one of the suggestions is that the

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Honourable Mrs. Faringdon, getting into difficulties or not having enough money to go on gambling with, annexed the jewels."

Jane listened, more bored than ever, to this unsavoury gossip concerning a lady about whom they knew next to nothing.

"It's hardly fair, is it," she said, "to say such things without any grounds for it? Surely, if anyone who was living close by had stolen jewels for the purpose of gambling, she would be found out at once in trying to sell them? They would be recognised and stopped."

"Not necessarily," said Mrs. Clarke. "They might be sent away, you know."

"Really," said Jane, with some impatience, "you talk as if it were possible that this lady, a member of an honourable family, were one of a regular gang of thieves having confederates all over the Continent!"

"I'm only repeating what has been said," said Mrs. Clarke quickly.

"And I'm quite sure," added Madame Robert, coming to the aid of her fellow-gossip, "that nobody can accuse Mrs. Clarke of being a '*mauvaise langue*,' or anxious to run anybody down."

The two ladies were evidently rather cooled by the lack of fervid interest in their narrative on the part of the invalid, and they shortly afterwards made excuses to leave and continue their scandal without the chilling presence of Miss Maristow.

Jane, however, was not quite so insensible to the interest of their story as she had appeared to be. Having seen as much as she had done of the inner life of one of the gay visitors to the Riviera, as revealed to her so suddenly and sensationaly on the evening of the revolver affair, she thought this piece of news worth thinking over, and she wondered whether there might not be a grain or so of truth in the gossip just retailed to her.

Since the merry, handsome Mr. Haldon had been really desperate enough to attempt suicide, was it not possible that there might be more ugly secrets beneath that smiling surface of things in the set in which he moved?

She sat up with a thought in her mind which brought a vivid spot of colour into her pale cheeks.

Mr. Haldon had said, on the occasion of his call the previous afternoon, that he would come again that morning to take away his parcel. Might she not then be able, perhaps, to get from him some details about this robbery, or at least to find out from his demeanour and his comments whether there were really any grounds for the rumours?

He had been so frank with her on so many points, he had evidently put so much confidence in her with regard to his own affairs, that she thought it very likely he might still be open,

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and that he would entrust her with more facts concerning the unpleasant business than the general public could get at.

Down in the depths of her mind—so deep down, in fact, that she was not always wholly conscious of them—were certain darker thoughts connecting Mr. Haldon with the affair which had just reached her ears.

What if Mrs. Faringdon had really done something she ought not to have done, and what if he had known of it and been distressed by it?

She did not exactly think these thoughts, but they lay unacknowledged at the bottom of her mind, as a consequence of the evident uneasiness which she had noted in Mr. Haldon on the previous day.

It seemed strange that the news of the robbery should have followed so quickly on his acknowledgment that he was in some distress of mind.

These thoughts and feelings increased Jane Maristow's anxiety for the arrival of Mr. Haldon, who had intimated that he should call upon her that day.

But the morning passed, and the afternoon, and Jane, who had refused to go out, as she hoped to receive her visitor before dinner-time, grew more and more anxious as the afternoon waned and no one came.

At dinner, however, she received more news,

dinner, and afterwards she went straight up to her own room, feeling unequal to the ordinary intercourse of the drawing-room while she was suffering from so keen an anxiety.

Before she went up a servant handed to her a letter which she opened with some interest, as she knew it was from the doctor who had been attending her, to whom she had sent a request that she might have her account, his visits having ceased some days before.

Long habit had made her so careful in money matters that, though now well able to afford any possible expense that she might have to meet, she still felt nervous and anxious, as the result of years of poverty, and counted up the cost beforehand of any fresh investment or expense.

The letter within the envelope gave her almost a shock. The doctor thanked her for her letter, but said that Mr. Haldon, having been the unfortunate cause of the accident by which her foot had been wounded, had insisted upon defraying the expense of the medical attendance necessitated by the affair.

Jane put down the letter and cried.

Mingled with her astonishment that the man who had spoken of himself as in abject poverty was able to pay her account so promptly, was a sense of gratitude to him for his thoughtful kindness which filled her heart with renewed sorrow at his illness.

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If he should die now as a result of this accident, what a void she seemed to feel would be in her own life.

She had got into the way of thinking about him and his affairs, wondering whether she could contrive in any way to supply him with some of the money without which he seemed to think life was not worth living ; whether by her means he could therefore marry the girl of his heart.

Even if Miss Faringdon were selfish and cold, Jane argued that she was, after all, the woman he loved, and he must know her faults better than she could do.

Jane would, therefore, have had no scruple in helping to bring about the match, and she felt how proud she would be if she could secretly assist in making him happy.

But this action on his part, this secret payment of her doctor, though it was perfectly fair and legitimate, puzzled and, in a way, almost frightened her.

Where did he get the money to do these generous things, to buy hothouse flowers for her, to pay her account ?

Was it possible, after all, that what he called abject poverty would be wealth to her ? And was the money which she possessed, which seemed to her so magnificent a fortune, but as a drop in the ocean to the wealth which would be enough to maintain him and the wife of his choice ?

Jane knew so little of the world that she felt this might be the case. She was perhaps making mountains out of molehills, was perhaps pitying him for his poverty when in reality he had more than enough for all reasonable or even unreasonable requirements.

But then again, she told herself, she was doing him injustice, and that he could not be so wickedly extravagant as that would imply.

And then, in the midst of her harassed thoughts, there came this wish, strong and irresistible, in her distress and perplexity about him. She must go and inquire after him in any case; see him, if that were possible.

CHAPTER VI

BEAUTY'S DILEMMA

It was still quite early in the morning of the following day when Jane Maristow heard the latest bulletin concerning Mr. Haldon.

It was unfavourable. He had lain at his hotel ever since the accident without once recovering consciousness, and although the doctors in attendance had not by any means given up hope, it was admitted that the case was a grave one.

To Jane it seemed hopeless; and, although she insisted on travelling to Nice by train to call personally at his hotel, she had but little faith that he would be able to escape for the second time out of the jaws of death.

Although she was still lame and obliged to wear improvised footgear on the injured foot, Jane could now get about without much difficulty with the assistance of her crutch-stick. So, unwilling to incur the expense of a carriage for the whole distance, she did the journey by train.

When she reached the hotel at Nice where she knew that the invalid was staying, she sent

in her card with a few words written on it to the effect that she was very anxious to know how Mr. Haldon was, and that she would be very glad if she might see him, if only for a moment, if that were possible.

Jane was shown into a large *salon*, where there were only two people, in one of whom she at once recognised the beautiful Ruby Faringdon.

The sight of the girl gave her infinite pleasure. Miss Faringdon was not, as Jane knew, staying at the same hotel as Mr. Haldon, and she was in outdoor dress, so that Jane had little difficulty in guessing that she had come on purpose to make inquiries about the invalid.

Jane was delighted. It seemed to her a proof that the girl had, after all, a heart under her coquetry and longing for wealth; and when her very first words concerned the still unconscious young fellow, Jane's heart went out to her.

Ruby Faringdon—who was exquisitely dressed in sand-coloured muslin embroidered in red, blue, and yellow, and wore a large hat of a deeper tone, with tufts of ribbon to match the embroidery on her dress—was talking to a thick-set, undistinguished-looking man with a fairly strong American accent. He was much older than herself, and appeared, in Jane's eyes, to be greatly devoted to her.

He was remonstrating with her about the

anxiety she showed, and assuring her that the young man would soon be well again.

Ruby, however, to Jane's comfort, was not easily solaced.

"If I could only see him for a few moments," she was saying plaintively when Jane came into the room. "They might let me see him, I think, when he has no relations with him, and when I'm such an old friend!"

"What good would your seeing do him, or you, if he's still unconscious?" urged her companion reasonably enough.

But Ruby persisted.

"Oh, don't you think they say that—the nurses—in order to keep people away? Of course, they prefer to keep him quiet in their hands and to keep visitors out; and, of course, that's right in most cases. But I feel so sure he'd like to see *me*, and that it would relieve his mind to say a few words to me, and to hear me speak to him, that I think they ought to make an exception in my favour! I wonder if I dare go up and try to get in, in spite of the nurses!"

"I shouldn't do that," said her companion quickly. "It would never do to take upon yourself such a responsibility. Perhaps they'll send for you if he wants you later."

"I wouldn't trust them," said Ruby, who was evidently very anxious and distressed, and whose eyes roamed restlessly round the room as

Jane was absolutely amazed at this address. "Really," she said, in a voice full of quiet dignity, after a moment's pause to recover herself, "I cannot understand your addressing me in such a tone, or using such words to me, Miss Faringdon."

The girl started.

"Who told you my name?" she demanded quickly.

"I have had you pointed out to me," said Jane gently, "at the casino as the 'beautiful Miss Faringdon,' and I took an interest in you because I understood that you were going to be married to Mr. Haldon."

The girl seemed more surprised than ever.

"I'm not engaged to him," she said in a lower voice, and with a glance towards the other end of the room, where the elderly American was looking at a newspaper.

"You are fond of him, are you not?" said Jane earnestly.

The girl blushed and looked askance at her questioner. Seeing her thus closely, and speaking to her for the first time, Jane Maristow thought that any infatuation a man might conceive for such a lovely girl was amply justified.

Not above the middle height, with a figure rather plump than slender, Miss Faringdon had a face every feature of which was almost without fault, a complexion as fresh as that of a child, and

soft golden hair which clustered round her forehead in little natural tendrils in the most attractive and babylike way.

Jane thought she had never seen so pretty a creature before, and she forgave the girl's haughtiness and ill-temper, believing that they were perhaps only the result of her unhappiness at the illness of the man whom, in spite of all, she loved.

"Well, if I am," the girl answered in a very low voice, "it is of no use. You seem to know so much about him and about me that I think you must know that, Miss Maristow."

She still spoke under her breath, so that Jane felt impelled to answer in the same way.

"I'm sorry if you are displeased at the extent of my knowledge," she said gently. "Indeed, I think you exaggerate it very much. But it is true that you can't well exaggerate the interest that I take in him and, if you will allow me to say so, in you also."

Ruby flushed and smiled a little.

"Why should you take an interest in me?" she asked.

"Because I know he loves you and is in despair at the thought that he's not well enough off to marry you," answered Jane simply.

The girl looked surprised, grew redder than before, and answered more gently.

"Well, you are in his confidence, I see. He

rushed after some old lady to speak about you, and I know that he went to see you two days ago."

Jane was still more perplexed.

Surely this radiantly lovely girl was not jealous of her worn, thin, plain self? Surely she did not suppose that it was a romantic passion which took him to see one so entirely devoid of charm and attractiveness as Jane felt herself to be.

"Yes, he did come to see me, but——"

"Ah! He did!"

The suddenness with which the girl flung these words at her bewildered Jane, who sat looking at her without answering, noting the strange clouding of the girl's face, the feverish anxiety—which yet was neither jealousy nor anything like it—that appeared at once in her beautiful blue eyes.

After a short pause, Ruby Faringdon appeared to become abruptly conscious that her own behaviour was rather strange, for she tried to laugh and to speak with less earnestness.

"I'm alarming you, I'm afraid," she said, "by my brusque manners. But really you need not be frightened; I won't bite." She took a chair near Jane, who had been considerably chilled by her strange conduct, and went on: "You can understand that I, as an old friend of Miles, should feel almost jealous of the interest that you take in him and that he takes in you, when you have only known him quite a short time."

"Jealous!" echoed Jane. "That is a strange word to use in connection with me, Miss Faringdon. You surely can't suppose that Mr. Haldon is in love with me?"

Jane let the girl see that she was rather offended and annoyed by her absurd attitude. Ruby's manner puzzled her. There was a strange sort of suspicion still in her eyes, though she made a half apology.

"You are quite right in thinking I'm fond of him," she said; "but I have reason to think he confides in you more than he does in me. That hurts me, don't you see?"

Jane was puzzled still.

"What makes you think he confides in me?" she asked.

Ruby looked down so that Jane could not look into her eyes.

"He told me so," she said.

Involuntarily Jane felt an access of pleasure; but she laughed.

"There's no harm in his confiding in a woman who feels so much interest in him as I do and who is so much older," she said.

"Oh, no, of course not," admitted Ruby.

But there was something she had still to say.

"Did he say much to you on his last visit?" she asked, after a short pause. "Did he say anything about me?"

Jane smiled.

"I fancy," she said, "that he can't talk very much about anything without coming back to that subject."

She thought that Ruby looked rather relieved.

"And he didn't take you into his confidence about anything fresh?" she persisted; "anything connected with—his troubles—or with me?"

Jane considered and said she thought not.

Ruby sprang to her feet.

"Well," she said, "it's very kind of you to have come all this way, before you're able to walk properly, too, to ask after Miles. I will let him know when he gets well, that you called, and I'm sure he'll feel very much flattered. And now, is there any message you would like me to give him for you when he regains consciousness? You know I'm staying with my people only a little way from here, and we are constantly inquiring about him."

"Yes; you may tell him I was pleased to find you here," said Jane, with a smile.

Ruby laughed.

"And if there's anything you would like to send him—any letter, or anything—just send it or give it to me, and I'll put it into his own hands, without any intervener," Ruby rambled on, as if at a venture.

Jane was quite surprised and touched by these words, although they were not uttered in a particularly sympathetic tone.

"Thank you," she said; "but I'm afraid he wouldn't value anything from my hands as he would from yours."

It seemed to her that a shade of disappointment crossed the girl's face, but the next moment she had her hand seized and shaken with every appearance of heartiness.

Then Jane went away and, returning to Monte Carlo, gave the eager Mrs. Clarke and Madame Roberts a somewhat meagre account of having seen and talked to Miss Ruby Faringdon, whom she had met on the same errand of inquiry as herself at Mr. Haldon's hotel.

Jane puzzled herself a good deal over the interview with the girl, who seemed to have been a mass of contradictions: now jealous of poor, plain Jane, now eager to take the invalid a letter from her, and unreasonable and perplexing in her manner altogether.

If she were fond of Miles Haldon, why did she not make up her mind to marry him? If she were not, what did it matter to her in whom he confided?

Jane began to wonder what the girl had meant by offering to give Mr. Haldon anything which she might have to send him, until it flashed suddenly through her mind that it might be the revolver of

which she had charge that Ruby wanted to get safely into her own hands.

Jane opened the portmanteau in which she had hidden the little parcel left in her care by Mr. Haldon and, without a doubt of its contents, pulled off the string and opened the paper.

Jane was not a women troubled with "nerves," neither had she ever been subject to fainting fits or anything of that sort ; but on seeing the contents of the paper she felt as if all the strength had suddenly gone out of her body.

For the little whity-brown paper parcel contained, not the revolver she had supposed, but the rings, the brooch, the sapphires, the pearl necklace which she knew had been stolen from Lady Chilcomb.

CHAPTER VII

THE STOLEN JEWELS

AFTER the first shock, Jane Maristow sat stupefied on the floor, looking at the jewels that lay in her lap as if they had been venomous creatures, to touch whom was death.

With her hands down at her sides and her eyes very wide open, she stared at the treasures which she had discovered, and tried in vain the while to escape the horrible conviction which would force itself upon her mind that Miles Haldon must have known what it was that he was giving her to take care of for him.

She had never till that moment doubted that it was the revolver which he was entrusting to her care. True, the parcel had been, as she now saw, larger than it would have been in that case, but she had not noticed this fact at the time; now that there lay before her what she could not doubt were the Viscountess's jewels she began to understand, dimly at first, but ever more clearly, the cause of his uneasiness and distress on that day.

He must have known what it was that he was bringing her. Why had he left in her charge such a hideous thing? Was it he who had stolen the precious stones? And was he aware that he was making the woman whom he pretended to esteem so much the unconscious partner in his crime?

To Jane the thought was appalling, incredible. How could she believe that the man, whom she had gradually come to look upon as the most interesting being in the world, would descend to such a despicable action?

Still sitting on the floor in an almost crouching position, and looking with wild eyes at the evidences of someone's crime, Jane patiently tried to find a way out of her difficulty; and at last, from among the clouds of doubt and misery, a ray of light came into her mind.

She remembered certain words he had uttered which had escaped her memory in the first shock of the horror she had experienced on finding the jewels in her own care. He had said that Ruby Faringdon wanted him to do something which he did not want to do. Was not Ruby, then, in all probability concerned in some way with the theft of the stones? And was not his share in the transaction only that of putting them into a place of safety until he should have an opportunity of returning them to their owner?

This seemed to Jane the most probable version

of the affair. Ruby Faringdon, herself greedy and fond of play, and her mother, who had a similar reputation, might have been concerned, one or both, in stealing the jewels of their kinswoman Lady Chilcomb, and Ruby might have tried to dispose of them by the help of her devoted slave, Miles Haldon.

That he would have allowed himself to be prevailed upon to do such a thing as dispose of the stones which Ruby or her mother had stolen Jane would not believe. He had said himself that the girl wanted to persuade him to do something which he shrank from doing, and he had called upon her, Jane, to help him to do what was right.

This was the view she insisted upon taking, and when she had persuaded herself of this there remained one other matter to be thought out : How was she to return the jewels to Lady Chilcomb without drawing suspicion upon herself and, through herself, upon Miles Haldon ?

If only he had been in full health all would have been easy. If even he had been just well enough for her to see him and to ask him to help her to return the jewels, all would have been well. But as it was she could not see him ; perhaps, indeed, he would never be able to speak again. And in the suspense which she now had to go through on his account she must make up her mind unaided as to what she must do.

Clearly, for her to go personally to Lady Chilcomb and return the stones to her was out of the question. She would be questioned, examined, or perhaps even given into custody. And, much as she shrank from such experiences on her own account, Jane desired to avoid them still more on account of Miles Haldon, whose trust she had accepted and could not betray.

If only he had not met with his accident she felt sure that he would have come to her as he had promised, have asked for the little parcel, the contents of which would in that case still have been unknown to her, and would have found means of giving them back to Lady Chilcomb without betraying the real thief, whether it was Mrs. Faringdon or her daughter.

Jane thought more and more strongly that the latter was the thief. She recalled the strangeness of Ruby's manner to herself and the words she had used to her, offering to give to Miles Haldon any letter or anything else which Jane might wish to send.

Had those words perhaps pointed to the jewels? Did Ruby, disappointed in being unable to raise money on the stones by Miles Haldon's help, wish to get them back into her own possession?

When her mind had grown a little clearer, and she had recovered from the first shock of the discovery, Jane began to turn the jewels

over in her hands, recognising them one by one from the description given by Madame Robert and freely advertised everywhere.

There was the pearl necklace, a wonderfully little thing to be worth ten thousand pounds, as Jane decided. There was the diamond necklace, the other necklace of sapphires surrounded by small diamonds ; there was the emerald brooch, and there were the two rings—the whole not more than she could hold in her two hands quite easily ; and Jane marvelled at the sight.

She was still staring in almost unabated horror and perplexity at the sparkling stones, and had finally made up her mind to send them to Lady Chilcomb by post, in a couple of small parcels directed in a feigned handwriting, when she became suddenly conscious of a slight sound in the direction of the door.

Down went her hands instinctively upon the treasures she held, while at the same time she turned to look towards the door. She remembered that she had not locked it, not having, when she entered, the least idea of the startling discovery which awaited her. And, in the second place, she remembered that she had uttered a cry.

The result of that cry had evidently been to attract the attention of someone, for as she turned her eyes towards the door she now saw it move, and was quite sure that someone must

have been looking in at her and was now retreating from the apartment.

Springing to her feet, Jane hobbled to the door, holding the jewels pressed against her breast.

She heard someone outside and she had no doubt that she herself was heard. For there was a sound as of hurrying footsteps, but when she peeped out into the corridor, which she could do very quickly, as the door had not even been shut, there was no one to be seen.

Jane fancied that she heard the noise of someone running down another corridor which ran at right angles to hers, at a distance of only a couple of yards. But she dared not go in pursuit, as she was still hugging the precious stones to her breast, and was afraid of dropping them or of betraying the fact that she was in possession of them.

With a very uneasy feeling she shut herself once more into her room, being careful this time to turn the key in the lock.

This unfortunate incident of having been seen with the jewels—as she could not doubt was the case—had complicated matters considerably.

She felt that she must now make all haste to rid herself of her embarrassing burden for fear she should be herself accused of the theft, or at the least be made party to it.

Who was it that had seen her? She thought

it most probable that it was one of the servants ; but the house was full of boarders, and it might well be that, surprised or alarmed by the cry she had uttered, a guest had softly opened the door and looked in while she was on the floor examining the jewels in her lap.

It was an embarrassing situation.

She felt that she scarcely liked to meet the rest of the inmates of the house at dinner, when she did not know whether one of them might not be in the secret of her possession of the stolen property.

It was possible, indeed, that the person who had discovered her in the very act of looking at the stones might already have given information to the police, and that she might at any moment find herself charged with the theft.

Jane, therefore, resolved to get rid of her burdensome treasure without delay. Sitting down to her writing-case, she directed two labels in a feigned handwriting to Lady Chilcomb and hastily divided the jewellery into two parts ; then, wrapping the various articles in small pieces of tissue paper, she fastened them up in two parcels, which she did up securely in brown paper and tied with string and sealed.

Then she sat down again to think out the next thing that she had to do.

If she were to send them unregistered through the post, might there not be a risk of their being

sitting beside her, lowered her voice and, looking at her, as it seemed to Jane, with a peculiar expression, asked :

"And do you know what they say over at Nice about the jewel theft?"

"No," answered Jane. "What is it?"

Mrs. Clarke looked at her quickly. Indeed, Jane's voice had odd tricks to-day.

"I thought perhaps, having been over there, and having seen some of the people of the place, you would have had something fresh to tell us."

"Oh," said Jane soberly, "of course, I didn't ask about anything but the state of Mr. Haldon's health."

Was it only her fancy, or did Mrs. Clarke throw at her a suspicious and strange glance when she uttered these words?

Jane could not be sure, and the same sensation of being on thorns, and of wondering whether the speeches made to her had a deeper meaning than was apparent on the surface, disturbed her throughout dinner.

Mrs. Clarke wanted to accompany her into the *salon* afterwards, but Jane said she had some letters to write and, excusing herself, ran upstairs and put on her hat and cloak to go out.

She looked nervously around all the time while she was dressing, unable to divest herself of the idea that she was being watched by unseen eyes.

When she got outside the house the same notion haunted her. She kept looking behind her in a manner which, as she confessed to herself, would have seemed highly suspicious to anyone who chanced to see her.

So afraid was she of being followed and watched that she went out of her way to reach the post-office by a devious route, and took a dark side street on the way.

Here she soon discovered that she had made a mistake, for the loneliness of the street frightened her, and made her aware that it would be easier to attack her under cover of this deserted spot than it would have been in a better-lighted and busier thoroughfare.

From time to time she looked behind her, as indeed she had done from the moment of starting on her expedition, and she had come in sight of a brighter street where she knew that she would be safe before she gave up the habit of taking cautious side-glances.

Just as she was flattering herself that she would be in a spacious, well-lighted street in another moment, a hand was placed over her mouth from behind and her own hands were seized and pinioned against her back.

At once she realised that she was in the grip of two assailants, and that both were men.

For that the hand that gagged her was that of a man she was sure, and that the pinioning

of her arms was also the work of a man she was equally certain.

Perhaps it was because she had been aware that she was watched when sitting on the floor in her own room with the jewels in her lap, and had been suspicious ever since, but Jane behaved in this dangerous situation with extraordinary coolness and presence of mind.

For one thing, by keeping her hands quite still and making no attempt to struggle or to release herself, she furnished to the would-be thieves no clue to the place where she had hidden her treasures.

The two parcels were both inside the bodice of the grey silk dress she was wearing. She had from the first resolved to leave them there until she should be on the very threshold of the post-office, when her hand thrust quietly beneath her cloak would be able to secure them without difficulty.

Now she hoped that this precaution might baffle her assailants.

For a moment the precaution appeared to have succeeded. One of her hands was examined, then the other, in a silence as mysterious as it was uncanny.

She felt as if she were being strangled, for the long cloak which she wore had been pulled back when her hands were seized, and was tightening round her throat.

Still she made no attempt to utter a word or a cry, being convinced not only that it would be of no use and perhaps dangerous, but also that she would be better able to note all that her assailants did if she remained perfectly cool.

And the thing about which she was most anxious was to obtain some clue to their identity.

But if she on her side was artful, they on theirs were cautious ; and they made no more noise than she did herself.

The man whose hand was in front of her mouth lost no time in feeling for her pocket, out of which he took and threw upon the ground her purse, her pocket-handkerchief, and her bunch of keys.

That was all the pocket contained ; but if he were disappointed, he did not express his feelings in words.

Next he felt the front of her dress and, with deft fingers, pulled out one of the two small parcels into which she had made up the jewels.

To her delight and relief, he appeared to think he had got all he wanted, for he did not look for a second parcel.

As soon as she saw that they believed their object to be attained, Jane decided upon a bold move.

At the very moment when she detected a slight relaxation of the other man's grasp of her two hands, she—usually so gentle—fastened

her teeth, which were strong and good, as firmly as she could in the flesh of the hand which was held over her face, biting it through the glove which covered it.

Then she heard a sound for the first time—a yell of pain and surprise.

For an instant she was horribly frightened, thinking that the men would retaliate by throwing her upon the ground or by breaking one of her arms.

But, on the contrary, her unexpected action seemed to have unnerved them, for she felt herself impelled forward by a violent push which threatened to throw her face foremost upon the ground. Recovering herself and looking round, she was only just in time to perceive the flutter of a long Italian cloak as its wearer disappeared through the nearest of the narrow passages between the houses, of which she had noticed several as she came along.

Jane would have liked to go back and to peer down that particular passage; but she decided that she had better make haste to get rid of that portion of the stolen jewels which still remained in her keeping, and so, running along the dark street as fast as she could, she turned into a better-lighted thoroughfare and breathed again more freely.

She did not even put her hand into her bodice to feel which of the two parcels it was that the

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thieves had taken until she was at the door of the post-office.

Then she cautiously put her hand within the front of her dress, and ascertained by the size and shape of the parcel that it was the pearl necklace which had been left. Knowing that this was by far the most valuable article of the jewellery, she felt a spasm of relief and entered the post-office with a lighter heart.

Two minutes later she had despatched the dangerous package and was returning to the *pension*.

CHAPTER VIII

UNDER SUSPICION

JANE felt that she could breathe again after the package containing the pearl necklace had been posted to Lady Chilcomb.

True, only one of the jewels entrusted to her had been safely returned to its rightful owner; but the necklace appeared to have been so decidedly the most valuable of the treasures committed to her care that at first she rejoiced in the fact that she had been able to save so much, and it was not until she had once more reached her own room that she began to grieve over the loss of the rest.

Diamond necklace, diamond and sapphire necklace, emerald brooch, and two rings—all were gone and Jane felt her failure keenly.

She did not even know who it was that had followed and robbed her, and she was only certain of one thing: that the assault and robbery were the work either of someone who had peeped in at her when she was sitting on the floor with the jewels in her lap, or of some confederates of that person.

She resolved that she would keep a sharp lookout for anyone in the *pension* who might have a wounded right hand, and that she would note the absence of any person with the object of finding out if he were the culprit.

She had taken off her hat, and was sitting by her dressing-table to rest a little and to recover her composure after the terrible excitement and confusion into which the attack had thrown her, when she became aware, she scarcely knew how, that her room had been entered for some purpose or other during her absence.

There was something unusual about the appearance of the apartment, and it was not until she had looked round carefully that she discovered that some of the furniture had been moved a little, and in particular that the articles upon her dressing-table—the brushes, combs, mirrors, and trays—had been disarranged, as if someone had searched among them hastily, presumably for some much-desired article.

This was the impression she obtained by her investigation, and although it is probable that the slight alteration in the disposition of both furniture and toilet accessories would not have been noticed by her at any other time, she felt quite sure now that she was not mistaken.

Someone had been searching in the room while she was away from it, and she had no doubt that it was one of the thieves who had attacked her.

He had entered her room when she left it to go out, and had then rummaged about in various quarters for the jewels which she had meanwhile been carrying in her dress.

Jane put her head into her hands and tried to recall exactly all that she had noticed; but the excitement of so many strange incidents—the finding of the jewels in the packet Mr. Haldon had entrusted to her and the attack upon her in the street—had made it difficult for her to recollect anything clearly.

Had she noticed the absence of any particular person or persons from the dining-room? No, she had not. But, then, there were several small tables in the room besides the long one at which she herself usually sat with Madame Robert, Mr. and Mrs. Clarke, and a few others, so that the disappearance of one or two of the customary occupants of the room would not have been remarked by her.

It was quite a common thing for one or other of the people staying at the *pension* to miss a meal, and as the house was nearly full and she had been very much preoccupied, she had not noticed any vacancies.

What ought she to do?

It seemed plain to her that there was at least one thief in the house, though whether among the servants, of whom there were not many, or the bearders she could not yet even guess.

Against the probability of the robbery having been the work of a servant there were the facts that the waiters were always occupied at meal times, and that the only other male servant she knew of did not usually come upstairs at all, his duties being in the servants' quarters.

But it seemed, on the other hand, unlikely that jewel thieves, of whom there were, she had heard, always plenty to be found on the Riviera during the season, should stay at a house so modest as that in which she had taken up her abode.

She wondered whether she had not better take into her confidence, at least in part, one of her two intimates, Madame Robert and Mrs. Clarke.

She could not be expected to tell either of them that the jewels lost by the Viscountess had been entrusted to her care by Mr. Haldon; but she might, she thought, confide in them to the extent of telling that she had been looking at some jewellery that day when she had suddenly become aware that she was being watched, and then she could go on with the story of having been attacked in the street.

Of course, she must expect to be questioned and to have to give an account of the circumstances, and, naturally, she would be asked to describe the jewels. She would also excite surprise if she were to say they were valuable, as she had taken care to pass for a woman not overburdened with wealth, and had certainly told them

that she had no jewellery of her own of much consequence, which was indeed the case.

On the other hand, even the inconvenience of answering searching questions was better than quiet acquiescence in the loss of the necklaces and the other things which had been entrusted to her care.

She felt that the secret of her discovery and her loss was too great a burden to be borne alone and, besides, it was just within the bounds of possibility that Madame Robert or Mrs. Clarke, both of them sensible and shrewd women and better used to the ways of the world than she, might give her a clue to the thief.

Unequal as she felt, therefore, to meeting the people in the house and to joining in the life of the place as she usually did, Jane felt that at all costs she must do so, and that she must use every effort to find out who it was that had visited her room and ransacked it.

With a great effort she rose to her feet, rearranged her disordered hair, changed her dress —the one she had been wearing having been torn in the encounter with the thieves—and went down-stairs.

It seemed to her, as soon as she entered the *salon*, where a dozen of the boarders, chiefly of the female sex, were sitting working or conversing, that her entrance caused a sort of hush.

She was quite sure that two or three ladies left

off talking abruptly, and that one in particular at once moved away from another guest, to whom she had been talking, with a guilty look, as if she had been caught conspiring.

And as she walked down the room and went slowly to the chair she generally occupied near a small table in a corner of the room, it seemed to Jane that curious glances followed her and that when she turned round on taking her seat several pairs of eyes were diverted almost, as she fancied, ostentatiously.

What had happened? Had news of the assault upon her got abroad?

That seemed most improbable; and if they had heard of it, the ladies would have been more likely to seek her society than to avoid her. They would have wanted to know all the details of the affair.

On what other hypothesis could she account for the change in the demeanour of them all?

Mrs. Clarke, who generally made way, with a smile and an inviting gesture, for her particular friend, remained absorbed in her knitting, and never even looked up as she came in. Yet Mrs. Clarke had seen her enter, she was sure.

It was certainly not possible that the assailants who had succeeded in getting away with so much of the jewellery could have told the rest of the people in the boarding-house about it.

It seemed to Jane that there remained only

one other explanation of the change in everybody's behaviour to her: it must have been one of the servants who peeped in and saw her with the jewellery in her lap, and he or she must have spread the news in the house, with two results, the one that thieves followed her and stole part of the treasure, and the other that people looked upon her with suspicion.

Jane grew almost faint with dread and terror when she began to realise this.

She took up a newspaper and, holding it in front of her as if engaged in reading, considered her position.

Should she boldly go to Mrs. Clarke and ask her what was the matter? Should she, affecting to ignore the change in the demeanour of everybody towards her, try to enter into an ordinary conversation with her?

But of this Jane felt incapable. Used to a retired and solitary life, she was not yet very easy in the mixed society in which she now found herself, and she was sure that to attempt to behave as if nothing unusual had happened while she sat under the gaze of cold, curious eyes would end in disaster.

She resolved upon the bold course and, rising almost unsteadily, so strong was the emotion which possessed her and made her reluctant to face the crowd, made her way slowly across the room to where Mrs. Clarke was sitting with her knitting.

That her action was seen and noted she knew. All eyes were fixed upon her, some stealthily, some openly; and as she took the seat beside Mrs. Clarke, which had been hastily vacated by another lady on her approach, Jane saw that she must be prepared for a cool reception.

"I've just met with an accident—a horrid accident," said Jane, in a trembling voice.

Mrs. Clarke, who was no more composed than she was, looked at her askance and went on with her knitting.

"Indeed?" was all she said.

Jane found it hard to go on under this treatment; but she persisted bravely.

"I've been assaulted and robbed on my way to the post-office."

Mrs. Clarke darted at her an involuntary look full of open mistrust, if not incredulity.

"Indeed!"

Jane sat up.

"I'm afraid I'm not going to receive much sympathy from you," she said, with a sort of passionate coldness.

Mrs. Clarke went on knitting for a few minutes in silence. Then she asked, without looking up:

"Have you told Madame Robert?"

"No," said Jane shortly.

"She is in her little *salon*," said Mrs. Clarke.

This was such a plain invitation to Jane to go that the unfortunate woman took the intimation that her presence was no longer welcome, and, rising without another word, left the *salon*.

Before she had had time to make up her mind whether she should go straight up to her room or brave another unpleasant interview by going in search of Madame Robert, the mistress of the house herself darted out from her little private room and stood trembling with excitement before her.

"Ah, Miss Maristow, will you come into my room for a moment?" she said, in a tone which bade Jane prepare for the worst.

She followed the mistress of the house into a small and cosy room, where they stood, one on each side of the small table, looking at each other with eyes eloquent of sombre distrust and suspicion.

"What have you to say to me, madame?" asked Jane, as the other did not at once speak again.

"What have I to say to you? But it is what you have to say to me, Miss Maristow. I have learnt things about you which I would not have believed if I had not had the evidence of my own eyes."

Jane uttered an exclamation. She felt relieved rather than displeased.

"Ah! Then it was you who peeped into

my room when I was sitting on the floor with the jewels in my lap?" she said quickly.

Madame Robert uttered a suppressed scream.

"Jewels in your lap! Peeping! No, of course not. I do not peep, Miss Maristow."

"What do you mean, then?"

"I mean that you, who pretend you know nobody here, are a friend of Monsieur Verdello's," said Madame hotly.

Jane frowned in perplexity as well as anger.

"Monsieur Verdello!" echoed she. "Isn't that the little thin Italian with the sallow face, who speaks to nobody and sits all day reading his newspaper in the corner?"

"Ah! You pretend you do not know him. He is your friend. He told me so."

"I've never spoken to the man in my life, and I don't understand you. When did he say I knew him? Where is he?"

"Where is he? He is gone. I supposed you were gone, too."

Jane began to tremble. A faint light was appearing in the clouds of bewilderment and uncertainty in which the reception she was meeting with had enveloped her.

"Tell me," she said abruptly, "exactly what has happened to make you say these strange things to me."

Madame Robert stared at her for a few moments intently, and then suddenly produced

CHAPTER IX

ARRESTED

Now that she was brought to bay Jane found it easy to stand up for herself, and to decide promptly upon what she should say in answer to the charge brought against her.

As for the accusation of being in league with the Italian, Verdello, it was preposterous, and she fully believed that it could not be sustained.

"You are talking nonsense, Madame Robert," she said calmly, drawing herself up to her full height and looking the Frenchwoman full in the face. "It is quite impossible that you can really believe me to have anything to do with that man. I have never spoken to him in my life, and I don't think I shall find it very hard to prove that."

"You admit having had this ring in your possession. That is the important thing. Never mind Monsieur Verdello," said Madame Robert sharply.

"Oh, yes, I admit that."

"Well, what more have you to say?"

ARRESTED

III

Jane thought a moment. She could not tell everything for fear of implicating the man who was lying ill, unable to speak for himself. But she saw that she must be as straightforward as possible, short of confessing from whom she had received the jewels.

"I admit having not only this ring, but another, two necklaces, a brooch, and a string of pearls in my possession for a few hours," she said. "I made them all up, as I thought, into two parcels, one of which was snatched from me on my way to the post-office this evening after dinner. Ask the servants—two of them saw me as I came in—and they will tell you how disordered I was, that my hair was pulled down and that my mouth was bleeding. I was attacked in a dark street, a hand was placed in front of my mouth, and my arms were pinioned behind me, while one of the two parcels I was carrying was taken from me. The other, which contained the pearl necklace, and which was directed to Lady Chilcomb—like the first—will be, I hope, by to-morrow morning, in the hands of its owner."

Madame Robert looked at her keenly.

"But how did you come by them?" she asked.

Jane hesitated.

"I found them," she said, "and recognising them by the description, I did them up in two parcels, as I have told you. This ring must

have dropped out of one as I was doing it up, or else I must have let it fall on the floor as I rose from it with the things in my hands."

"Rose from the floor?"

"Yes. I found a parcel without knowing what was in it, and it was not until I had opened it, sitting on the floor in my room this afternoon, that I had any idea it contained the stolen jewels. When I found out, I screamed, and then I heard someone shut my door. So I know that someone in this house must have seen me, and I can only suppose it was the Italian, Monsieur Verdello, whom you saw coming out of my room after I had gone out. Now it remains to be seen whether he will turn up to-night. I don't suppose he will; for I believe it must have been he who attacked me, and I think he must have had a second man with him. And in the hand of one of the two I have left a mark by which he can be identified."

There was sincerity in every line of Jane Maristow's face, in every tone of her voice. Nevertheless, Madame Robert, used to the wiles of plausible adventurers of both sexes, frowned and looked doubtful.

"Where do you say you found this parcel?" she asked shortly, after a pause.

Miss Maristow pondered.

"I think I'd rather not say where it was," she said at last. "I am strongly inclined to think the

jewels were not stolen at all, but that they were lost while they were being carried by someone."

"Very likely. But still there's no harm in saying where you found them, is there?" persisted Madame Robert.

But Jane was resolute.

"I think," she said, "you ought to be satisfied with what I have told you. At any rate, before you cross-examine me any more you had better try to find out what has become of Monsieur Verdello."

Madame Robert started.

"Verdello! Yes," she said, "he must be found." She turned again to Jane. "But if he is found," she said, "you will still have to come forward and repeat your story, or tell us something more."

Jane looked troubled.

"I don't know what to do," she murmured to herself.

Now a little more composed, she remembered that she had a very great grievance against this woman.

"I think, Madame Robert," she said in a very stern tone, "that you ought to have waited to ask me what I knew of this ring before you took the boarders into your confidence about the affair."

Madame Robert started and looked uneasy.

"I did not take them into my confidence," she said quickly.

"They know all about it, I am sure," retorted Jane. "When I went into the *salon* just now the conduct of them all was most marked. Nobody would speak to me, and they looked at me in a way which left no doubt in my mind that they suspected me of something, though of course I did not then know exactly of what. I should have thought a woman of your experience would have had more tact than to let such a matter become known to everybody. It will create quite a scandal."

Madame Robert seemed to be only just waking to that fact.

She wrung her hands.

"I assure you, Miss Maristow," she said, "that the only person to whom I said a word was Mrs. Clarke."

"The greatest gossip in the place," answered Jane.

Madame threw out her hands with a gesture of despair.

"She was your friend," she said. "I thought she would have more discretion."

"Why was it necessary to say anything to her about it?"

"When such a thing as this happens," she said, "it is too much of a surprise, too much of a burden, to carry alone. I was overwhelmed, confounded, I could not understand. I consulted Mrs. Clarke, who is a friend of yours and a woman

of experience, as to what to say, what to do, what to think. She looked grave, and so—*mon Dieu!*—did I!"

Jane sighed. She could understand, although she scolded Madame Robert for her indiscretion, how natural that indiscretion was. When all the town was excited about the theft of the Viscountess's jewels, and interested in the affair on account of the slight connection they felt themselves to have with the smart set of the Riviera by reason of Jane Maristow's chance acquaintance with Mr. Haldon, it was only to be expected that Madame Robert, on finding a jewel which she thought she recognised as part of the stolen property in the room of one of her boarders, should be filled with curiosity so strong as to overpower her prudence.

In the minds of both women, as they considered the situation, there began to be grave doubts how far the consequences of madame's act of indiscretion might reach. Madame Robert had not supposed that Mrs. Clarke would betray her confidence so quickly and so thoroughly, and she began to dread lest a scandal in the house would be the result of her rashness in confiding her impressions in one of the boarders.

Jane, on the other hand, foresaw that this was inevitable. It was evident that everybody in the house had by this time heard of Madame Robert's startling discovery of the ring, and it was

impossible to doubt that the news would be all over the town within a very short time.

Her fears were fulfilled even sooner than she expected. For a frightened servant now came in to ask madame if she could see someone who was asking for her.

And the man added, in a voice just loud enough for Jane to hear: "The police have come, madame."

The boarding-house keeper upon this was not sufficiently mistress of herself to avoid showing her dismay. She wrung her hands, she cried, she exclaimed that she was ruined, and she behaved in such a fashion that it was Jane who, laughing rather bitterly, told her to collect her wits and to put the best face she could upon the matter.

But before Madame Robert had had time to compose herself there was a brisk rapping at the door of the room, and as she said "Come in," the unmistakable face of a police official showed itself, and was immediately followed by the rest of his person and by a second and a third man.

The man looked round keenly, but he did not take the dignified and calm-mannered Jane for a person connected with the affair which had brought him. He turned abruptly to the boarding-house keeper.

"I should like to speak to you alone, madame," he said.

Madame, horribly frightened, looked imploringly at Jane.

"I—I—will you leave us, Miss Maristow?" she said in a quavering voice.

But Jane, seeing how far things had gone, thought it better to take the bull by the horns. She would have to face an interrogatory, and she might as well get it over without delay.

"If you have come about the finding of a valuable ring," she said in French to the official, "I can tell you something about it, for it was I who found it."

"Ah! You, then, are the Mees Maristow concerning whom I have received information?"

"Yes," said Jane.

Madame Robert broke in, asking the official sharply who it was that had given the information. But he declined to say.

Turning to Jane, he asked her for particulars of the discovery, and she told him at once that she had found, she believed, all the lost jewellery, that she had intended to return it all to Lady Chilcomb, but that she had been robbed of part of it on her way to the post-office.

Then followed the inevitable difficulty. Would she say exactly where it was that she had found the jewels?

But Jane refused once more, quietly but firmly.

The officer looked at Madame Robert, who

could only clasp her hands, gaze upwards, and declare that she left the matter in his hands. He turned again to Jane.

"You must see," he urged politely, "that the information you have given us is not enough. You say you found the whole of the missing jewels, but that you were robbed of one portion, and another portion you posted to the lady who lost them, and yet a third portion appears to have been found in your room."

Jane sighed helplessly.

"I can say no more," said she. "But I can tell you of a mark by which you can identify one of the thieves who robbed me, if you find him. He will have an injured right hand."

"In the meantime, unless you can give me more definite information, I regret that I must take you into custody."

Madame Robert groaned and started up, but Jane, though she grew very pale, remained still and silent.

"Won't you wait till you have found out whether I have spoken the truth about the pearl necklace which I have sent to Lady Chilcomb?" she asked in a low voice.

The officer shook his head.

"We cannot do that. Here is a ring, which you admit to have been part of the property, found in your own room. And you admit, further, that another portion of the stolen property has disap-

peared. I regret the necessity, mademoiselle, but I must take you before the magistrate in the first place, and you can repeat your information to him."

Having heard of the methods of French *juges d'instruction*, Jane began to tremble. But there was no help for it, so she submitted and allowed herself to be taken away at once, to the great horror of Madame Robert, who intervened and begged that Miss Maristow might at least pass the night under her roof if she herself became responsible for her.

But this could not be allowed, and Jane, with a very cold farewell to madame, resisting that lady's attempt to throw her arms round her neck and kiss her on both cheeks, went quietly out in custody.

CHAPTER X

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

JANE was by this time almost inured to her terrible position. It seemed to her that she could not fail to escape the disgrace of a trial if she could only obtain an interview with Lady Chilcomb, to whom she could perhaps dare to tell at least part of the truth. If the lady should prove to be a trustworthy and reasonable sort of woman, she might perhaps venture upon telling her the whole truth.

This seemed the more likely as Jane felt sure there must be some suspicions in the mind of the Viscountess concerning the identity of the thief, since rumours concerning the Faringdons had spread already from Nice to Monte Carlo.

In the meantime she could do nothing but what she had already done: admit the finding of the jewels and decline to say where that occurred.

Jane was taken to an office, where she was interrogated by another person, and gave always the same replies.

She braced herself up for a further trial at the

hands of the magistrate, but was informed that this examination could not take place before the morning, and that she must consider herself in custody for the night.

For the first moment Jane was struck with dismay.

"You won't let me go back to the boarding-house for to-night?" she asked in tremulous tones.

"We cannot until you have been examined, at all events. Perhaps by that time you will have been able to bring forward some proof of what you have said, or you will see the necessity of telling more than you have done."

This was evidently a tentative speech on the part of the officer, but it drew forth no response from Jane, who silently resigned herself to being a prisoner.

Alone that night she thought over her situation, with many tears and in deep agony of spirit.

Was it to this that her change of fortune had brought her? Was this the happy future she had imagined, the golden time of enjoyment, after the long years of waiting and of dismal resignation to the bitterness of loneliness and poverty?

She could scarcely yet understand how it was that her present desperately unhappy position had come about. Surely it could not be possible that she must suffer all the ignominy of prison for nothing worse than a hasty act of friendship and

kindness to the man she had already saved from self-destruction.

For a short time she rebelled against her more generous self, told herself she was sorry she had not left Miles Haldon to carry out his purpose and put an end to a life which seemed fated to bring harm and misfortune upon itself and the friends who had intervened to preserve it.

She even wondered whether Miles had been aware of the fact that in taking the parcel from him she was bringing danger and suspicion upon herself. Was he, in fact, the actual thief? It might be so. Had he used her as an innocent accomplice in a great crime?

It was not unnatural that—in the first outburst of shame and misery—when she found herself imprisoned and friendless in a strange country, Jane should suffer these doubts and fears. True, her imprisonment was unaccompanied as yet by any unpleasant rigours. But the mere fact that she was under arrest, that she was for the first time in her life not mistress of her own actions, not free to go where she would, struck the unfortunate woman with a sense of humiliation and dismay such as she had never known before.

It seemed to her as if she would never get over the degradation to which she had had to submit, and in terror she pictured to herself the possibility that she might have to undergo the bitter shame of a trial for theft.

For there was the insurmountable fact to be got over that she had admitted to having had possession of the whole of the stolen jewels, and that she could only account satisfactorily for the disappearance of one article—the pearl necklace.

The ring which had been found in her room, which she had accounted for so truly but so lamely, was the strongest evidence against her. But not very much less strong was her story that she had been robbed of one part of the jewels by two unknown men.

She herself thought that one of these men would prove to have been the Italian, Verdello, who seemed to have disappeared, after having been found by Madame Robert coming out of Jane's room.

But who would attach much importance to what she might say in the attempt to fasten the blame for the disappearance of so much valuable property which she acknowledged to have had recently in her possession?

It seemed to Jane, indeed, that she herself would have thought, as Madame Robert had thought, that there was a plot between her and the Italian, that they were confederates in the matter of the jewel robbery.

But when the first transports of her misery were over Jane came to herself and, in shame at her own weakness, dried her tears and, with a

strong effort at self-control, reviewed her own position more calmly.

She told herself that she was ungrateful to doubt the sincerity of Miles Haldon's feelings towards herself, and that it was nothing but the accident of his being ill which had prevented his coming to see her and to relieve her of the dreadful burden of the jewels.

If only she had been content to leave the parcel unopened; she would have brought upon herself none of the trouble which now weighed her down. It was her fatal curiosity—pardonable, no doubt, but still unfortunate—which had brought upon her this burden of misery and shame.

And once more the face of the young man as she had last seen it—handsome, gentle, the eyes fixed upon her full of deepest gratitude for what she had done for him—rose up in her mind and seemed to reproach her with her own mistrust.

Torn between conflicting emotions, now of mistrust and misery, and now of self-reproach and remorse, Jane at last fell into a sleep which was broken and unrestful the whole night through.

In the morning came the dreadful examination by the magistrate; and Jane, although prepared in some way for what she had to endure at his hands, was terribly shaken by the ordeal. But although he roared and raved, and stamped his foot and tried by every explosive means known

to Continental justice to extract from her more than she would tell, he did not succeed in eliciting one syllable more than had already been got from her by Madame Robert and the police officer.

She admitted what she had admitted already, but steadfastly refused to say in what place she had found the parcel which contained the jewels.

She earnestly and repeatedly begged that she might be allowed to see Lady Chilcomb, urging that, in the first place, the Viscountess would be able to prove or to disprove what she stated—that she had sent her the pearl necklace, the most valuable of the stolen jewels, by post; and secondly, that Lady Chilcomb might be able to prove, what Jane herself believed, that the jewels were not stolen at all, but that they were lost by a person who was lawfully in possession of them.

She got no immediate answer to this request, and was informed that she must remain in custody pending further inquiries.

But before the day was over the door of the room in which she was confined was thrown open, and a lady who announced herself as Lady Chilcomb, and whom Jane recognised as one of the ladies she had often seen about the casino at Monte Carlo, entered and, with a cold bend of the head, stared at her in a sort of furtive way as Jane rose to meet her.

The Viscountess was a tall, good-looking

woman of about forty-five, with dark hair very plainly dressed; she was so enveloped in handsome furs and overshadowed by the plumes of her wide hat that she looked quite overwhelming.

Jane nervously offered her a chair, but the Viscountess took no notice of the offer, and continued to stand, looking at her with evident curiosity and interest.

She opened the interview abruptly enough.

"What made you steal my jewellery?" she asked quite simply and as a matter of course.

Jane was aghast.

"I have not stolen it," she answered hoarsely. "I think you must know that. It was stolen by one of your own relations, and everybody knows it."

This was a bold stroke, and quite unpremeditated on Jane's part. The words seemed to take her visitor's breath away; she turned very white, and stared at the prisoner before her with a look more of anger than surprise.

"It's not true," she said at last. "But, of course, you know that as well as I do, and you are doing yourself no good by bringing such accusations against people who are your superiors in every way. If you will confess where you have hidden the rest of my things, and if you will give up the names of your accomplices, I promise that you shall be treated as leniently as possible. But you must expect to be punished for what you have done."

Jane laughed and sat down at the little table and, clasping her hands loosely together, laid them before her and said nothing.

Lady Chilcomb grew angry at this attitude, which she looked upon as one of defiance.

"I thought," she said, "that I should find you penitent. I was led to expect it. But you seem to be quite hardened."

Jane, who perceived that she would waste her time if she were to try to argue against the Viscountess's prepossessions, turned her head and said, almost indifferently :

"I sent your pearls back last night. Did you get them, my lady?"

"Yes, I got them. But there is nearly three thousand pounds' worth of other things that I have not had back. If you can send me those back also——"

Jane interrupted her impatiently.

"I cannot," she said. "I did mean to do so, for I admit I have had all the things advertised in my hands. But one ring I dropped without noticing it in my room, and the rest were snatched from me on my way to the post-office. There, that is the truth. I have nothing more to say."

Lady Chilcomb did not believe a word of this story.

"I am not in the least vindictive," she said, without paying any attention to the unfortunate

prisoner's words, "and I assure you both the Viscount and I will do our best for you if you will only restore what you have stolen."

Jane waved her right hand impatiently.

"It's quite useless for you to stay here, Lady Chilcomb," she said, "if you can only repeat those words like a parrot. I've told you I did not take your jewellery, and that, having found it, I did my best to restore it to you. If you don't believe me, there's no more to be said."

And she leaned her head wearily on her hands.

Lady Chilcomb went on with the same steady obstinacy.

"I'm very sorry for all this, and so will Mr. Haldon be when he is well enough to hear about it."

At the name Jane looked up, her eyes full of strange fears.

What would he say, indeed, when he learned how badly she had fulfilled the trust he had placed in her?

"Is he better?" she asked.

"Yes, he is better," said Lady Chilcomb, as coolly as if she had not supposed she was talking to a thief. The fact was that she thought it possible she might still prevail upon Jane to confess and make restitution and, with that idea, thought it best to be civil. "He is now conscious, and his mother is with him."

"I am very glad of that," said Jane heartily.

And she began to wonder whether, when he learned what had happened, he would be able to take her part and clear her name, in spite of the consternation he would feel at the loss of the jewels.

Lady Chilcomb evidently thought she had found an opening which she might use with advantage.

"Of course, it was through Miles Haldon," she said, in a rather less distant tone, "that we first heard of you, Miss Maristow; and I, for one, felt very grateful to you for saving us from any talk there might have been about the revolver accident by taking it so quietly. It was through that, I believe, that you first made his acquaintance?"

She looked curiously at Jane, who perceived without difficulty that she herself was looked upon by Miles Haldon's friends as an adventuress, who had seized upon the first possible opportunity of making the young man's acquaintance, probably with the object of some material gain for herself.

"Yes," she said slowly. "It was through the accident by which I got a wounded foot that I first knew Mr. Haldon."

"I daresay," went on Lady Chilcomb cautiously, "you thought he ought to have made you some pecuniary compensation for what he did."

Jane felt that her blood was boiling, but she said nothing. It was interesting to her to know exactly in what light she was regarded by Miles Haldon's friends.

The Viscountess went on :

"I am glad to have the opportunity of telling you that he would certainly have done so had he been able. But he is not well off, and he felt that no amount that he could have paid would have been sufficient to compensate you for the pain and inconvenience you have suffered."

Then Jane turned to her, and was able to smile at her sardonically.

"You are very good," she said. "But really I was quite satisfied with what Mr. Haldon did. He paid my doctor's account—without my knowledge, as I certainly should not have allowed him to pay it had I known anything about it. And now, my lady, even you must feel, I should think, that you have insulted me enough. I think it is a pity we should prolong this interview."

Lady Chilcomb stared at her in surprise. Coming as she did, with a fixed conviction that Jane Maristow was a needy adventuress who had contrived to scrape acquaintance with Miles Haldon by means of an accident of which she probably exaggerated the importance, she did not understand this haughty attitude taken by the prisoner.

Lady Chilcomb honestly believed that Jane had

profited by the acquaintance she had made with Miles to arrange the theft of the jewellery, although she did not pretend to know how this had been done. It seemed to her probable that Jane had wormed out of Miles as many details as she could concerning the habits and property of his friends, and that she had made use of the knowledge thus gained to steal the jewels.

The fact that she had returned the pearls did not affect the Viscountess's belief. Either Jane did not know their value, or thought they might be difficult to dispose of or easy to identify; or else Lady Chilcomb thought that Jane had sent them back hoping by that means to satisfy the woman she had robbed and to stay further pursuit.

The demeanour of the prisoner was so dignified, so unlike what she had expected in the supposed adventuress, that Lady Chilcomb felt constrained to utter some sort of apology as she prepared to go.

"I had no intention of insulting you, Miss Maristow," she said simply. "It is the last thing I should think of doing, especially at such a time as this. I hoped to make you look upon my visit as rather a friendly one. I'm sorry I have failed. Good-bye."

Jane bowed and turned away without a word.

Lady Chilcomb was disturbed and perplexed by this interview, when she thought it over on her way

adventuress, and of the way in which she had got hold of Miles and used the acquaintance to find out and steal the jewels, was filled with dismay.

She had not dared to tell her son that the woman of whom he had so high an opinion was really the thief, and now she dared not tell him that she was in prison. After an exciting passage of arms, she insisting that he must give up his mad notion of having an interview with Miss Maristow until he was better, and he insisting that he would not rest till he had seen her, she burst into tears and confessed the truth.

"I don't know what to do or to say," she sobbed. "And I do beg you to be sensible and not mind. But, Miles, your heroine is not a heroine at all. It was she who stole the jewels, or was concerned in stealing them, and Lady Chilcomb has just seen her—in prison."

The face of Miles grew ashy white, so that his mother, stricken with terror, thought that he was dying and screamed for the nurse.

But he silenced her with an imperious gesture.

"Mother," he said in a tremulous and hoarse voice, "there has been a most awful injustice committed. You must go to Lady Chilcomb at once, and ask her to come and see me without a moment's delay."

In vain Mrs. Haldon coaxed, cried, entreated, called herself a murderer, and begged him to

rest quietly and not to trouble his head about thieves or anything else till he was well.

He persisted; he grew so agitated that she dared refuse no longer, and left him under a solemn promise to bring Lady Chilcomb to see him at once.

The Viscountess, as much perturbed as she at the news she brought, consented at once to come to the bedside of the invalid, hoping to persuade him to rest quietly and to suffer his disenchantment without undue distress.

But as soon as she saw him she perceived that there was no possibility of that. With his eyes alight with deepest distress he greeted her and made her sit on the chair at his bedside.

"I have to tell you something," he said, "that will distress you greatly, and it breaks my heart to have to tell. Your jewellery was stolen by your own niece, Ruby, and unless you withdraw at once from your present position of prosecutrix in this case against poor Jane Maristow, I must give evidence in court myself."

Having been ordered to save himself as much as possible by speaking to the point and in as few words as he could, Miles made this speech cruelly abrupt.

The Viscountess could not at first believe her ears. But he proceeded, knowing well that she would not prosecute her own niece, telling her of the way in which the theft was carried out,

"No, no, no, there must be no putting it off, no delay. How can you do anything but make amends to this unfortunate woman for what you have done?"

She was alarmed by his persistence.

"I hate to have to talk to you about this now," she said, "but I must remind you that she admits having had all the jewellery, and that she says she was robbed of some of the things, which have disappeared, while one ring was actually found in her room. Whoever gave her the things to take care of, then, she has managed to make away with a large portion of them. I don't see why she should not be prosecuted, since it is clear to me that she is an adventuress who has got hold of you and is making use of you."

Miles, who did not care to tell her the truth about the beginning of his acquaintance with Jane, but who had allowed it to be thought everywhere that the discharge of the revolver was an accident, could not let her know the depth of his obligation to the unknown English-woman who had saved him at her own risk and hurt.

But he stubbornly took her part.

"Miss Maristow is no adventuress, but an honourable and noble woman," he said. "I'd pledge my life on her honesty. We'll find your jewels, never fear. I'll set about it with all the energy I have as soon as I'm about again. In the

meantime, I can only repeat what I say: unless you have her set free at once by declaring yourself satisfied that the jewels were actually stolen by someone else, and that she had nothing to do with it, I must give evidence in court."

" You wouldn't surely say anything to incriminate Ruby Faringdon ! " cried the Viscountess incredulously.

" I would, indeed. I should have to tell the truth, and I would do so. Nothing is so important in my eyes as exonerating Miss Maristow."

" Well, I suppose I shall have to do what you want."

Lady Chilcomb rose with her mind in a very disturbed state. She did not doubt for one moment that the young man had been in some marvellous manner hypnotised into love or frenzied admiration of this old-looking woman, whom she regarded as a commonplace adventuress.

And she believed she was doing the only thing possible in resisting to the utmost the wish of Miles that this woman should be set free.

She at once met Mrs. Haldon outside the room of the invalid and, having sent the nurse in to take charge of him, the two ladies went downstairs to confer upon the dreadful position in which they were placed.

Lady Chilcomb's face was eloquent of her distress, and the other lady questioned her at once.

" What did he say to you ? " she asked quickly.

You're cleverer than I am, and I've been so much upset by all these troubles—my boy's illness, and then by all this about the woman and the jewels—that what little brain I ever had is in a hopeless state of confusion."

Lady Chilcomb was frowning, deep in thought.

"We shall have to get the woman released, I'm afraid," she said; "or she will marry him to spite us all as soon as she was let out, and I shall be further off than ever from getting my jewels back. Perhaps he will succeed in persuading her to give them back if we get her let out at once."

Mrs. Haldon sighed. She was not hopeful.

"I think I'd better see her myself, and try to beg or buy her off. What do you think of that idea?"

"I think you'll have to be very careful," said Lady Chilcomb. "She is dignified, and has a way of putting one in the wrong. She expects to be treated as a great personage, and you'd better humour her."

"It's a tiresome thing to have to do," said Mrs. Haldon; "and the worst of it is, I'm afraid Miles will find me out, and then there will be more worry."

Lady Chilcomb was still in a very ill humour, with her thoughts more fully occupied with her lost jewels than with anything else.

"I think," she said, "that Miles ought to think more of his own carelessness in handing the things over to this woman than he seems to do."

Mrs. Haldon looked frightened, wondering whether the Viscountess would try to make her son responsible for the loss of the jewels.

"Well," she said, after a moment's pause, "you wouldn't have got back even the pearl necklace, if he hadn't insisted on taking the things from Miss Faringdon, would you?"

Lady Chilcomb frowned.

"I think it's rather early to be sure that Ruby had anything to do with it," she said. "We have only your son's word for it, and though, of course, I should not doubt his account, it's only fair to hear what the girl has to say for herself. I'm going to see her now."

"I'm very thankful that she and Miles have broken it off," said little Mrs. Haldon with a sigh of relief. "Before he came over here he seemed to be bent on making a fool of himself about her."

This was a return shaft, but it was delivered in the sweetest and most innocent voice; for Mrs. Haldon was one of those little, fragile-looking women who can say cruel things with a sting without appearing to be aware of the fact. Lady Chilcomb shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, there's certainly a risk in marrying

a young and pretty woman," she said, "and Miles will escape that if he makes Miss Maristow his wife."

With which parting retort she went away and, as she had said, at once went to the hotel where the Faringdons were staying and asked to see Ruby.

Her niece came in almost at once, smiling, fluttering, and apparently delighted to see her aunt, but with a little red spot in the middle of each of her cheeks, which betrayed the anxiety at her heart.

"Ruby," said her aunt solemnly, "I've just been told something about you, and I think it only fair to tell you about it. Miles Haldon says it was you who stole my jewels."

The girl stood up, indignant, scarlet with rage, clenching her hands and looking at her aunt through eyes that swam with tears of resentment.

"Miles told you that? Did he forget to tell you that it was he who put me up to it? That I took them for him to gamble with? Ask him, ask him. He won't dare to deny it. Oh, he is a wretch, a mean wretch, to betray me so!"

Her aunt stared at her in consternation.

"Ruby, is this true?" she asked hoarsely.

"It's quite true," she answered sharply. "He told me he was mad because he couldn't marry me. I refused him—I had to refuse him—because he has no money. You know all about that.

I told you I should have to, though I like him, and you agreed it was the only thing I could do. Well, then he was in despair, or said he was, and it was he who told me to take the jewels and to give them to him so that he could raise money upon them and make enough to marry me upon. I didn't want to do it, but he made me. Of course, he thought he would be sure to be able to get them back again. But, as you know, in the meantime he has been preyed upon by an adventuress, and I suppose she got the jewels out of him. Then he met with his accident, and afterwards, I presume, she thought she could do as she liked with them."

Lady Chilcomb listened to this account, which was rather more plausible than the other, with ever-increasing indignation.

"It was a most disgraceful thing of you to do," she said sharply. "You really deserve to be prosecuted for it."

Ruby shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, you can have me taken up if you like," she said. "Pray do so, if you think it will make you feel more resigned to the inevitable. I'm quite ready to be used as a scapegoat, if you wish."

"You take it very coolly," said her aunt. "Do you really think so lightly of what you have done? Don't you know that it was theft?"

"It was not done for myself," said Ruby

quickly. "Ask Miles. He took the jewels from me, and I had no profit—nothing but the shame of having done it. I am ashamed of it, of course, only I don't see that I should be made to bear all the blame."

And the girl burst into tears.

Lady Chilcomb let her cry; she could not feel quite sure which of the two stories she had heard was the true one—that of her niece, who declared she had stolen the jewels by desire of Miles for him to gamble with, or that of Miles, who said she had stolen them and begged him to raise money upon them for her.

The fact which stood out in bold relief in her mind from this background of shifting responsibility was that, between these two people and the third, who had been dragged into the business or who had pushed her way into it, she had lost some very valuable property which she saw no prospect whatever of recovering.

"I wonder whether we shall get at the rest of the gang?" she exclaimed plaintively, after a pause.

Ruby, who was sobbing, looked up in bewilderment.

"What gang?" asked she.

"The gang who has stolen my jewels," said her aunt fretfully. "I have to suffer for you all. Whether your story is true, that Miles made you take the things, or whether it's true that

you took them of your own accord and asked him to raise money on them for you, I have to suffer, and I am the only person. The affair is the most disgraceful thing that ever happened. My own niece robbing me—for it was robbery—and then handing over the jewels to someone else. How can you defend yourself?"

"I'm very sorry," sobbed Ruby, who was indeed in a state of pitiful distress.

But her aunt was shrewd enough to remark that she had been apparently light-hearted enough until the moment when Miles's confession made things uncomfortable for herself.

"As for the woman who appears to have been in league with some more thieves to get hold of my things through Miles, she is a person used to this sort of thing, and I suppose makes it her profession. It seems to me that she is much less culpable than you, who, being my own niece, ought to have been above such a despicable action."

Ruby whimpered:

"I was so fond of Miles; I would have done anything for him!"

"Indeed! I understood that you wouldn't even marry him because he was not well enough off to satisfy you."

Ruby hung her head.

"Everybody is hard upon me," she murmured; "and it isn't fair."

"Well, if you do see him," said her aunt drily, "I hope you'll get him to persuade Miss Maristow to give up the names of those accomplices of hers who have my jewels."

"I'll do what I can," said Ruby.

CHAPTER XII

FOR WANT OF EVIDENCE

RUBY was consumed with the keenest jealousy and rage, not only against this insignificant and despicable adventuress who appeared to be daring to set up her own claim to influence over Miles in opposition to that of the spoilt beauty, but against Miles himself for having ventured to rebel against herself.

The blame of the theft of the jewels rested upon her alone, as she well knew but strenuously denied. But, spoilt child that she was, she had expected that Miles would bear the whole blame of her act by holding his tongue as to her share in the matter and his own refusal to carry out her wishes.

Although she did not look upon the sallow and gaunt Jane Maristow in the light of a rival, she was bitterly indignant with Miles for threatening to expose her for the sake of this unknown woman. And if she could have seen Miles then, as she tried to do, there is little doubt that she would have inflicted upon him such an outburst of jealous anger as would greatly have retarded his recovery.

But both the nurse in charge and Mrs. Haldon

said she had come to offer her apologies to Miss Maristow for the wrong they had all unintentionally done her, and that, in sign of her regret, she had brought Mrs. Haldon with her to make Miss Maristow's acquaintance.

Jane, who had learnt in imprisonment, short as this had been, a wholesome lesson in worldly knowledge, looked at them both with undisguised suspicion, asking herself what it was they really wanted of her.

"Do you mean," she asked, with a grave, cold bow to Mrs. Haldon, turning to speak to Lady Chilcomb when this address was finished, "that you believe what I told you, and that you are not going to prosecute me?"

"Yes," said Lady Chilcomb; "that is what I have come to tell you. I have made the fullest inquiries, and while I believe you will allow me to have been justified in doubting you, since my jewels have certainly been lost, and, by your admission, were in your keeping, I see there is not enough evidence for the charge against you to be sustained, and I have already withdrawn it and, moreover, have begged the police authorities to let you go."

"And do you think they will?" asked Jane doubtfully.

"I think so. A formal appearance may have to be made—I daresay there will—but I think that will be all. My husband and I have

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exerted ourselves to have you completely exonerated, and I hope that in return you will do all in your power to help us to bring the real thieves to justice."

"Indeed I will," said Jane heartily.

After the terrible suspense and misery which she had suffered during the past few days, this most unexpected promise of deliverance caused her heart to bound with an exhilaration which made her inclined to overlook much in the treatment of herself which she had at first looked upon as inhuman and unpardonable.

Perhaps she was shrewd enough to see that under all the specious words of Lady Chilcomb, and the cool curiosity of her companion, there lay still a considerable amount of mistrust. But she was not inclined to be captious in her joy at the message they brought, and she listened with an overwhelming sense of relief to their glibly-spoken speeches.

On her side she was taciturn without being morose; and though she gave Lady Chilcomb a verbal assurance that she bore no malice, and that she looked upon what had befallen her as an unavoidable accident, there was nothing more on either side than an appearance of forgiveness. And the ladies, when they were outside, smiled at the idea they had entertained that there was anything of the sorceress about the sallow, silent, crushed creature they had just seen.

"And now Miles will be satisfied," said little Mrs. Haldon, with a sigh of relief, as she and her companions sauntered towards the casino, where they had arranged to meet the Viscount and his brother Charles. The latter, a man of very different temperament from his elder brother, had been in a condition bordering on frenzy ever since he had learnt the share his beautiful daughter had had in the scandal which, though now partly hushed up, had already spread far and wide on the Riviera.

Jane Maristow felt as if in a dream. Now that she could hope that the worst of her terrible experience was over, she fell from the pangs of her bitter despair and agony into a lethargic state, in which she sat with her hands idly before her, staring in front of her, not at the wall of her room, but at the wide future of dreary greyness which stretched out beyond.

What should she do now? Where should she turn? Since this first experience of the freedom and luxury of her new life had already landed her in such a quagmire of misery and distress, ten times more awful than her previous dull existence, how was she to take the next step on the uncertain road?

She sat with her head in her hands for a long, long time, thinking out the problem, and deciding, with a clenching of the teeth and a tightening up of all her nerves, that she would go back to the

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pension and brave all comments, and stay on there unless she was actually turned out.

And this fate, she thought, would not be hers.

Although she knew very well that the ladies who had just left her were by no means so benevolently disposed towards her as they pretended, and although she was sure that the chief reasons for their comparative civility were based on self-interest, there was the fact that the prosecution was dropped, and this at the moment was enough for poor Jane.

Mrs. Haldon, silly, little, large-eyed, soft-skinned woman that she was, redolent of the luxury in which she had passed her fifty-five years, looked upon the gaunt prisoner as an adventuress who had tried by some evil and surprising means to get hold of her son, and had deservedly failed in the wicked attempt.

Lady Chilcomb looked upon her as a doubtful person, probably an associate of thieves if not a thief herself, and was civil in the hope that, having got her necklace back owing to some mysterious freak of remorse, she might perhaps recover yet more of her property in the same manner.

But Jane did not much care what they thought of her. These two beautifully dressed, idle, luxurious women, with their delicate perfumes, their handsome dresses, their dainty jewellery, seemed not to belong to the same species

kind, almost boyish look which had charmed her so much before, giving her a strange fleeting insight into a character wholly different from hers, and into a life which she could scarcely understand.

"Won't you speak to me, Miss Maristow? It wasn't all my fault, you know."

His voice was gentle, the tone even pleading. Jane's heart went out to him in surprise and a new and strange delight.

She had supposed that they were apart for ever, that she would never see him or speak to him again; and here he was, apparently pleased to see her again, and thinking, at the moment of meeting, not of the injury her thoughtless curiosity had inflicted upon him, but of the pain and trouble which the affair had brought upon her.

It was such an unexpected, transcendent joy, this discovery that her cherished interest in life was still active, that this man whose friendship she had prized was still her friend, that it was almost more than she could do to retain her composure.

She struggled with her weakness, however, and succeeded in keeping down nearly every trace of it as she held out her hand and said:

"Of course I will. I'm delighted to see you again, Mr. Haldon. You took me by surprise."

"That's right. You were not sorry to see me, then, although I've been the cause of more trouble to you?"

"Well, it wasn't your fault this time," she said gently, under her breath. "I'm dreadfully sorry, dreadfully, that my curiosity led to the unhappy——"

He checked her. His face grew even more eloquent of his kindly feelings towards her as he went on :

"Don't say a word about that. I was to blame from the first. You can guess, I suppose, how it happened. I did give you a hint that somebody wanted me to do something I would not do. For fear of being worked upon, and not trusting my own strength when pitted against hers, I made you the custodian of what I ought to have kept in my own possession. Then came my accident, and—what you had to suffer. I don't think I ever felt so much cut up in my life as when I found out what had happened. I told them, if they didn't let you go at once, I'd appear in court and tell the whole truth."

"You did? You said that?" She turned away abruptly, afraid of betraying more weakness than she cared to show.

"Tell me," he whispered in her ear, "are you suffering for it still? You look as if you were!"

She shook her head, but could not speak. The kind tone, the evident concern of this handsome young denizen of a world different from her own affected her strangely.

would make her amends for everything was, when one came to think about it, the really ridiculous outcome of his life and circumstances, which had made it seem quite natural for him to think that marriage with him would be a heaven-sent blessing to the lonely spinster.

Luckily for her, and for the pleasure his folly undoubtedly gave her, no suspicion as to his motives could possibly enter her mind. She was so economical ; she made her small stock of hats and dresses, gloves and sunshades, last so long by dint of great care, that nobody could have guessed her to be a wealthy woman. Her former habits had become so well-established that it would actually have hurt her to cast aside a pair of gloves when they began to get soiled; and she preferred spending hours in the solitude of her room in cleaning them, as well as in repairing the frayed hem of her dresses, to laying out an unnecessary penny on new ones while there was any "wear" left in the old.

She could, therefore, hug to her heart the knowledge that Miles's offer was quite disinterested, and it was in that fact that her joy in it lay.

For she did rejoice. When the almost boyish proposal slipped out of the young man's lips, warm with impulse, and tender with regret for what she had suffered through him, Jane felt a thrill through her heart such as other young women know more generally in their girlish years. The sense of poignant gladness was new, and

strange, and fascinating to her who had lived so long in the shade of life.

He, this handsome, idle, extravagant young man, whom she looked upon as representative of the whole aristocracy of wealth and luxury, was ready to marry her, the plain, solitary woman who stood still timidly on the brink of enjoyment, as yet without the courage to drink.

She could not understand it. And she stood so long without making any attempt to answer him, that at last Miles grew impatient, and asked abruptly :

“ Did you hear me ? Are you angry, offended, what ? ”

Then Jane turned to him, and his blue eyes met her grey ones, and he saw in her gaze no anger, nothing but a sort of hilarious expression which he had never seen in the grey, solemn face before.

“ Well ! ” said he.

“ Well ! ” said she.

And then she smiled.

“ Do you know what I said, what I asked you ? ” said he.

And there was perhaps a touch of astonishment, of youthful arrogance in his tone. After all, he could not but be aware that he was offering something which was not considered valueless, even though Ruby Faringdon had rejected him. The spoilt beauty had made no secret of the

reason of her rejection, and had frankly confessed that, if only they could have afforded it, marriage with him would have been the height of happiness for them both in her eyes.

Jane's answer was given in a very low voice.

"Yes. You asked me to marry you, didn't you?"

"Well, and what is there in that to laugh at?" asked he rather haughtily, as the faint smile with which Jane spoke began gradually to grow broader and sweeter until she was looking at him with a sort of ecstasy of pleasure which he had never seen in her face before.

Jane still smiled, in spite of his annoyance. But it seemed quite a long time before she was able to explain herself. It was not indeed until he, angry with her for this apparent contempt, with an exclamation of impatience, was turning to go away from her, that she said, in the same very low voice:

"No, no, don't be angry, when you've just made me so happy!"

He turned round at once, with the old beaming, happy-go-lucky expression on his handsome face.

"Ah! That's better! Then you do know that I am grateful, that I want to make you happy? And you will let me try?" he said eagerly.

With a sudden maternal instinct, Jane laid

her hand very lightly for half a second on his sleeve ; and withdrawing it again instantly with a faint blush in her cheeks she said :

“ My boy, you’ve done that already. You have made me happy.”

“ Have I ? Are you glad I am so fond of you ? Will you be happy as my wife ? ”

She shook her head dreamily, but without change of expression.

“ No, of course I shouldn’t,” she answered simply. “ I should be very unhappy indeed, I expect. But, luckily, I have a little too much sense—though I haven’t got much—to allow you to make such a sacrifice.”

“ But it wouldn’t be a sacrifice at all,” he said robustly. “ My only regret is that I’m so poor that I can’t give you all that my wife should have in the way of luxury ; I couldn’t keep a motor-car for you, but then I’ve got friends who have cars, and they’d lend them to us, and——”

She stopped him by laughing outright.

“ And do you really think I should be so silly as to take you at your word ? ”

He grew very red.

“ I hope you don’t think,” he said, with sudden stiffness, “ that I ask you to be refused ? That I don’t mean what I say ? ”

Then the smile died out of her eyes and she answered gravely :

“ I am absolutely certain that you could never

do anything that was not chivalrous and generous and noble, Mr. Haldon. No, may I say Miles? I should like to call you that."

By a sudden revulsion of feeling induced by her gentle kindness, which was grave, dignified, sweet and infinitely touching, he snatched her hand and kissed it.

"You will give me pleasure by that, and by everything you can do to show me you care a little for me," he said.

And the fervour of his tones brought the red blood into her cheeks once more.

"You will make me vain," said she. "I do care for you very, very much. So much that I want you to be happy all your life, as you would not be if you were to marry me."

"And why not?" asked he in the tone of a dictator. "You are not one of those wild, harum-scarum, extravagant women who can't settle down, are you? Or a suffragist, or anything of that sort? Why shouldn't you be happy with me, if, as you say, you like me?"

"Oh, the reasons are too many for me to begin to tell them," said Jane, with an unusual attempt at playfulness.

"Ah, but I must have them. I'm not going to be put off like that. There's a seat over there. Will you come and sit down and talk it out with me fairly and squarely?"

"I should love to," said Jane quite briskly.

This was a pastime she had never even dreamed of for herself, the receiving and refusing of proposals of marriage from handsome young members of the gilded youth.

He laughed a little at the enthusiastic way in which she gave her answer; and they sauntered on, both excited and interested by the talk they were going to have, until they reached the seat which he had pointed out, where they sat down and for a while looked idly out at the sea below without speaking.

"It's lovely here," she said softly.

"Oh, you're not going to put me off like that, Miss Maristow. By the bye, if I let you call me by my Christian name—as I have done," he went on in great high spirits, which were infectious, "you must give me the same privilege. What is your Christian name?"

Jane, catching the infection of his youth and glow, smiled mischievously:

"I decline to say," she said demurely. "I wish to be treated by you with the respect due to my age, and you cannot be allowed to take the liberty of calling me anything but Miss Maristow."

"We'll alter all that presently," retorted Miles in an undertone, with coolness which delighted and amused her, though she drew herself up a little in an attempt to look more severe than she felt. "And now for the first of the reasons why you presume to think I shall suffer you to refuse me?"

"that I've offered to marry you when all the while I was in love with somebody else?"

"What! Are you so inconstant?" asked Jane.

"No, I don't think I am. But I've had to go through so much, on account of what she did, and I'm so disgusted, that I've lost the feeling I had for her, lost it entirely. There's no need to make a secret of it now; it was she who took the jewels, and who wanted me to raise money on them for her. Of course she thought she was going to get the money back, and to double it first. But the fact remains that it was she who took them, and that if she had lost the money she wanted to borrow she wouldn't have been able to redeem them."

Jane bowed her head.

"It was very, very wrong of her," she said. "But I suppose she did it because she was anxious to get money for you and her to marry upon?"

Miles, however, looked doubtful.

"I don't know about that," said he. "I only know she wanted the money."

"It seems to me," said Jane, "that there can only have been the one explanation of that. She thought she could get what you both wanted, and in a frenzy of despair she did that dreadful thing. Oh, how can one think that a young girl, brought up in an honourable home, could have stooped to such an action without a strong motive?"

"Are you sure that love is always the strongest of motives?" asked Miles dubiously.

Jane looked bewildered.

"Isn't it?" she asked simply, after a pause. "I know nothing about it myself: it has never come in my way. But I should have thought it was the strongest. You, however, must know better than I do."

"Do you mean that you think I have made many experiments in love?"

Jane smiled.

"I should think you must have done," she said. "But of course I don't know. I know nothing about it."

He looked at her with interest.

"And aren't you curious to find out something about it?" he asked rather mischievously. "By Jove! It's too bad to want to deprive me of the pleasure of trying to teach you."

Jane was looking rather solemn.

"It's lucky for me," she said slowly, "that I don't care to learn."

"You think I should treat you badly, that I should be an unkind husband."

"No, I don't think that. I think you would be an impossible husband. Oh, that is not as uncivil as it sounds, I assure you. Supposing we were both so unspeakably foolish as to do as you suggest, and you were to take an old wife, and I a young husband."

"But you're not really so much older than I am, to begin with."

"In years I know I'm not, but in everything else I'm old enough to be your grandmother. Yes, yes, I know what I'm saying. I've lived a life you know nothing about; I'm not going to tell you anything about it either. But it's a life that ages one before one's time; so I count that I'm about forty-five. You, on the contrary, have lived the life that keeps one young; you've been happy, irresponsible, spoilt, if I may say so. So instead of being what you say you are, twenty-seven, you're really somewhere between eighteen and nineteen. The result is that, while there are only five years between us by the calendar, there are quite twenty-seven years in everything else."

Miles looked at her in admiration.

"Trust a woman," he said solemnly, "for making out a case! It's marvellous! You have only got to wave a wand—of fancy, and things become just what you want them to be!"

Jane shook her head.

"What I *don't* want them to be," said she. "But what they really are. I am glad to think of your coming to me like this, and honouring me as you have done. I shall be pleased and proud of it as long as I live. But that's enough for me. To do as you suggest is out of the question, and I like to think that you will get over your

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anger with the beautiful Miss Faringdon, and that she will be sorry for the dreadful thing she did, and that you will come together again and marry and be happy ever afterwards."

"We shouldn't be, you know. Even when I was mad about her I never thought that we should. We are both too selfish, too much spoilt, and we should make the usual semi-detached pair, each going their own way within a very few years."

Jane looked at him with a twinkle in her eyes.

"And is that the sort of existence you proposed for me?" she asked. "Certainly I can understand that better than the old-fashioned idea, for such an odd match as you proposed! I could have taken to knitting and spectacles, in my way, and you—I suppose—to big game shooting and—shall I say flirtations—in yours?"

But Miles, though her tone was almost sportive, did not look amused.

"You don't quite do me justice, I think," he said. "But, after what you saw of me at the outset, and even since then, perhaps that is only natural."

"I'm sorry if you think that. But it's not true," she said more gravely. "I think I do you every possible justice. And it's hard not to do even more."

Touched by the tone in which she spoke,

Miles looked at her shyly and was silent for a little while. Then he said :

“ Won’t you then consider what I said ? Won’t you think it over ? ”

Jane laughed gently.

“ Oh, yes, ” she said, “ I can promise you that. In fact, I shall probably go on thinking it over as long as I live. For I’m certainly not likely to get another offer ; I never had one before, and I never thought I should have one at all—and especially from a man like you.”

“ But I mean—won’t you consider and give me another answer ? Leave it undecided for a few days ? ”

“ No, I can’t do that. My mind is quite made up. Even if I were in love with you—and I thank Heaven I’m not— ”

“ Why do you say that ? ” interrupted he, offended.

“ Oh, don’t mind what I say. I meant something very complimentary, I assure you.”

“ You call it a compliment to say you’re glad you can’t love me ? ”

Jane was a different woman by this time from the prim, subdued maiden lady he had always seen her except at moments of emotion. She was so gentle, so sweet, so evidently happy in this new experience, that there had come a look of tender humour into her eyes, a smiling look over her whole face, which transformed her.

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She laughed again at his indignant tone.

"It is a very great compliment. For if I were in love with you I know that I should love you very much, that I shouldn't get over it, and by-and-by that would be bound to make me unhappy. Mind, I know you would be good to me, but that is not enough for a jealous nature like mine. Remember, I've never known anything about love, and sentiment, and romance. So that anything of that sort would be bound to cut deep, and—oh! I know what I mean, and I suspect that you, in your heart of hearts, do too."

Whether he did or not, he pretended not to.

"I only know," he said, "that you choose to be unkind. Well, it doesn't matter. But, since you refuse to accept me as a husband, I hope you won't cut me altogether as an undesirable acquaintance?"

"I shouldn't choose to do so," she said, the humorous twinkle appearing in her eyes. "But I'm not at all sure that that isn't what your people would like me to do, Miles."

It was touching to hear the low-voiced pleasure with which she repeated his Christian name. He was much pleased with the sign of the feeling she had for him. The words, however, which she had just uttered were not so pleasant.

"You don't think they would be other than nice to you?" he said quickly.

"Oh, but that's just what I do think," she said, and the smile left her face at the remembrance of the manner in which Lady Chilcomb and Miss Haldon had looked at her. "I think they will be delighted to know that you are out of danger from me, and if I had been silly enough to do what you asked me to do, they would never have forgiven either you or me."

Miles looked disconcerted.

"You don't mean ever to speak to me again then?"

"I should be very sorry to say that. But feeling, as I do, that I must bear some part of the blame of the loss of Lady Chilcomb's jewels, I should like, not only to keep out of their way, but as much as possible out of yours too—until I have succeeded in tracing the lost things."

"Surely you don't hope to do that? They are broken up long ago."

"I hope not," she said with a troubled look. "And you can't be sure that they are. I don't despair."

He was surprised at her persistency in what seemed to him an absolutely absurd idea.

"Even the police," he said, "think there's very little chance of discovering the thieves. You see there is so little to go upon: merely your suspicion about this man Verdello, who, after all, certainly took nothing from the room he was seen to come out of."

"I think," said Jane, "that he must have been one of the two men who attacked me, and it is a fact that he has not been to the *pension* since that evening. I have to add though that Madame Robert knew he was only breaking a journey at her house."

Miles smiled.

"It's not enough to build great hopes upon," said he.

"No," said Jane steadily. "But until or unless I do get some clue to the thieves, I mean to be resolute in forbidding you to look upon me as anything but a stranger."

"I shall certainly not allow that," said Miles with decision.

"You won't be able to help yourself. I give you notice, Miles, that after to-night I mean to cut you dead."

"You won't have the heart! Besides, why should you? My mother and Lady Chilcomb can't prevent my having what friends I please."

"I will not be your friend against their will," said Jane, with a quiet obstinacy which he recognised as final. "But some day I hope that they will understand"—and she looked into his face with a gentle regret which he found infinitely touching—"that they need have no fear of me. Now you must say good-bye."

She held out her hand, and refused even his entreaties that he might accompany her a little

way on her homeward road. With the gentlest but firmest manner in the world, she persisted in saying that they must part where they were. So he took her hand in his, and looking into her face with an expression which had grown almost shy, he wished her good-bye and left her.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CRESCENT SCAR

JANE felt the tingling of her hand for a long time after he had given it a final pressure, and had looked into her face with an expression of reverence and remorse which went like a dagger to her heart, filling her with new feelings, and with a new sense of something she had hitherto lacked in life.

She walked with a freer, bolder step than usual, and decided, with the glow of the recent interview with Miles still upon her, that the new life was better than the old, and that what she had gone through was worth enduring for the sake of that new sensation, so keen and yet so sweet, which made the blood flow more quickly through her veins, and intoxicated her with the sudden awakening to the knowledge that she was still young, and that she was a woman and not an automaton after all.

Even with the preoccupation of this discovery, however, Jane was aware of a strange circumstance which diverted her attention, be-

fore she had walked very far, from Miles and the interview she had just had with him.

This was that she was undoubtedly being followed and watched, not openly, but by stealth.

But for the attack which had been made upon her when the jewels were taken, Jane would not have been sure of this. But since that event she had been nervous when walking out alone, and the sense of being followed, which had seized her on that particular occasion, now came upon her again, so that she was quite sure, without being able to do more than guess at the identity of her pursuer, that she was being shadowed.

However, she only quickened her pace, and arrived at the *pension* without any further incident, though she was tormented by the knowledge that her meeting with Miles had been noted by someone.

Nothing appeared to come of it, however, and she was suffered to mature at her ease a new plan of life which had entered that very afternoon into her mind.

She had made the great sacrifice of bidding Miles regard her as a stranger, and she meant to keep him at a distance as long as he and she should remain on the Riviera.

But with that vivid flash of colour and light which his proposal had brought into her existence, there had come also a new experience to her. She began to be nettled by the contempt of these

smart kinsfolk and acquaintances of Miles Haldon's, and to ask why she should not at least show them that she was not the poverty-stricken woman they supposed.

She felt the stings of vanity, too, and desired that Miles Haldon, although he was to remain a stranger to her, should see that she was not quite so remote from civilisation, as he knew it, as he imagined.

And mingled with these two strains of thought was the desire to attract to herself once more the attentions of the thieves who had stolen the Viscountess's jewels from her, in order that she might, as she believed she could do, identify the man who had gagged her mouth with his hand, and upon whose flesh she had, as she was sure, left a perceptible mark.

So she set about making such an alteration in herself as should astonish those who had despised her on account of her supposed poverty and consequent insignificance.

In the first place she removed from Monte Carlo to Cannes, and the next thing she did, though with many a pang of remorse, was to ask her solicitors to send her an order upon a bank in the neighbourhood for no less a sum than three thousand pounds.

The appalling extravagance of which she seemed to be guilty threw Jane into such a flutter of excitement that she could scarcely sleep at

nights for thinking of it. But her mind was made up, and though with a guilty feeling that she deserved, after this, to find that her fortune had melted into thin air, Jane went to the bank when her wish had been complied with, and drawing out upon the spot a thousand pounds, proceeded to expend it in dress and jewellery with which to turn the dowdy chrysalis into a fully-fledged butterfly.

Little though she knew of jewellery and dress for herself, Jane had studied these subjects in an academic way in the days when such luxuries seemed far off from her. She was not young enough to be easily carried away, and the jewelers and *modistes* with whom she at once proceeded to deal found in her a shrewd customer who insisted, even on the Riviera in the season, on getting value for her money.

There was something odd and mysterious about the tall, thin, dowdy woman who bargained so cleverly, was never taken at a disadvantage, and never purchased anything but just what she wanted.

Her experience with milliners and dressmakers of the old days now stood her in good stead, and she herself was amazed at the change which a few well-cut gowns and a little judicious expenditure in diamonds made in her.

She took care not to be ostentatious, but a hundred pounds spent on a pair of brilliant solitaire earrings, another hundred invested in a handsome diamond and pearl ring, a hundred and

fifty in a watch encrusted with diamonds, had an effect so good that she was induced to be a bit more extravagant, and to purchase diamond combs for her hair, a couple of handsome brooches, and a bracelet with a big sapphire surrounded by diamonds.

As for her dresses, she knew enough about such matters to choose with excellent taste ; and from the silk muslin with frills of fine lace which she wore in the mornings to the serpent-green silk which she wore at dinner at the hotel where she now stayed, and the handsome gown of apricot satin which she kept for concerts and the theatre, no fault could be found with her dress, which was handsome, well thought out, and appropriate both to the wearer and to the occasion.

As Jane had been quite obscure before, and as she had allowed the gossip to die down before she made this great change, the metamorphosis of the dowdy spinster of the *pension* at Monte Carlo into the well-dressed and smart woman of the hotel at Cannes passed unnoticed to all outward seeming.

Jane found new friends, sufficiently sympathetic for all the purposes of casual companionship, much more easily now that she was passing as a comparatively wealthy woman than she had done when she arrived on the Riviera as a lone, lorn spinster with only one trunk.

Even the superficial life of the place became pleasanter to her, although she was haunted all the

while by three thoughts: the vast extravagance of which she was guilty; the problem of the recovery of the stolen jewels; and the fortunes of Miles Haldon.

There was something soothing, however, in the atmosphere of comfort and ease which now surrounded her, and the issues at stake were sometimes in the background of her mind instead of foremost in her thoughts, when she made an acquaintance, casually, with a woman who fascinated her by superficial graces combined with keen intelligence, and by open and flattering preference for Jane.

Madame Blanche, for so the new acquaintance called herself, was a woman of about thirty years of age, small, fair, almost plain of feature, and decidedly affected of manner, but vivacious, adventurous, sometimes almost witty of speech, and what women call "interesting."

She was an Englishwoman, and professed to be the widow of a French officer, to whom she declared herself to have been devoted. But nobody knew anything about her antecedents, and she attracted so much attention from the masculine frequenters of the hotel, that the other women, all but Jane, who was never ill-natured, wondered "where she came from."

Jane did not trouble herself about such matters. The stranger was attractive, well-dressed, daintily turned out from the crown of her head to the sole

of her foot, and much more agreeable as a companion than the more austere ladies, chiefly of "a certain age," who formed the greater part of the feminine population of the house.

Madame Blanche professed to be charmed with Jane, tried to draw her out, expressed a frank desire to know all about her life, saying she was sure there was something very romantic about her life which she was dying to learn.

Jane laughed, protested that she was entirely commonplace, but did not let herself go in the matter of confidences.

She had done with the old life, at any rate for the present, and she held that the details of it were her own property and no concern of anyone else.

So Madame Blanche's curiosity had to remain unsatisfied, until she one day informed Jane that she had taken a villa a few miles away, and hoped that Jane would come and spend a few days with her there.

"Perhaps," she suggested, "you might even like, later, to go shares with me in taking the place. It's a sweet little house, not too big, and with a lovely view, and we might spend a few months every year there very pleasantly, if you liked the idea as much as I do."

"I should have to take time to consider such an undertaking as that," said the prudent Jane. "But I should like very much to come and see you there."

"Well, I shall be installed in a few days. Come and see me the Sunday after next. By that time I shall be settled, and able to give you all my time, as I should like to do. I want to make you fall as much in love with the place as I am myself."

This was arranged between them, and within a few days Madame Blanche, her French maid and her army of little dogs, had taken their departure for the villa.

Miss Maristow was already seriously considering the proposal that had been made to her. She liked the bright South, she liked the entire change from her old life; she found a pleasant tonic in the gossipy talk of the lively Madame Blanche, in whom she had seen no harm.

Jane thought that she might do worse than arrange to share the expenses of a modest home in this beautiful climate, where she knew, too, that the Haldons and their friends came every year.

What might not happen before another Riviera season came round?

If she should be lucky in getting on the track of the stolen jewels, which she still dreamed of doing, and if Miles should preserve his affection for the beautiful Ruby Faringdon, might it not come about that she, the despised and dowdy spinster, would some day be the means of helping these two to start life together?

Jane had formed many fantastic plans with the purpose in view of dowering the young couple without their knowledge, but with the connivance of the elders of both families. What a revenge it would be if she, the outsider, as they considered her, should make it possible for this marriage to come off, and should receive the thanks of the majestic Lady Chilcomb and the flippant little Mrs. Haldon, and satisfy her own heart at the same time!

She was full of these idle dreams when she paid her promised visit to the villa, which was a charming little square, white house, perched on a height among olives and palms, within full view of the sea.

Madame Blanche, surrounded by her little dogs, and charming in a filmy "creation" of heliotrope and cream-colour, was seated in her pretty *salon*, with the windows wide open, when Miss Maristow arrived.

Half a dozen friends, all well dressed, lively and radiant of aspect as far as the feminine portion went, were paying their court to the fascinating hostess.

Jane, however, was at once advanced to the post of honour, and introduced to the fair widow's friends, most of whom were French, and all of them charming.

The afternoon passed merrily in the society at the villa, and Jane had almost made up her

bitten had been with her day and night ever since the assault.

Now, although her mind had been occupied with far different thoughts, the sight of the scar woke all her suspicions at once, and connecting, as she did, the assiduity of Madame Blanche with the man with the wounded hand, she recognised, as by a flash of inspiration, that she was not in the society of a number of idle and frivolous people, as she had supposed, but had fallen into the midst of a gang of adventurers, who had determined, for reasons of their own, to get hold of her.

The little man who had just taken her teacup from her, who posed as a French marquis, and in whom she was sure she confronted one of the thieves who had stolen the Viscountess's jewels from her own person, was slim, neat, undistinguished, but possessing no obvious trait of a suspicious kind. There was nothing sinister in his look, nothing arresting in his manner, and if Jane had confided her thoughts to a friend, she might well have been told she was making a mountain out of a molehill, and had no just grounds for her suspicions.

But Jane would have been unmoved by any such argument. Quite fixed and firm in her mind was now the conviction that she was surrounded by adventurers of the worst and most dangerous description; but, instead of showing

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any nervousness, she went on talking and laughing as before, with only this difference that, instead of enjoying herself without a thought beyond the moment, she now occupied herself in making a keenly critical survey of the people round her.

Monsieur d'Abbeville, the pretended "marquis," appeared to be an old friend of the hostess; and Jane, who had hitherto looked upon Madame Blanche as a frivolous woman of the world, now began to wonder whether she was the head of the gang of swindlers, and whether the rest of the lively people surrounding her were members of it.

She hoped she had not begun to betray her uneasiness when Madame Blanche insisted upon her coming to a seat beside her, and inquired, with a mischievous look, why she had not brought with her the admirer of whom she had so much reason to be proud.

Jane, rather startled, asked demurely whom she meant. Madame laughed with gentle mockery.

"Oh, you can't play the innocent with me. I know too much," she said, smiling. "I know —everybody knows, that you have made a conquest of the handsomest man in Nice, the young Englishman, Miles Haldon."

Jane frowned in great displeasure.

"Indeed," she said earnestly, "that is absolutely absurd. There are many years between Mr. Haldon and me. There is no sort of romance about our acquaintance. I happened

to be able to do him a service, and he is grateful. That is the whole story. Our acquaintance was only one of a few days; he took my part in an important crisis of my life. Then we said good-bye, and we have never met since. You cannot make much of that."

Madame Blanche affected to receive this story as true, but it was easy to see in her eyes that she did not believe it.

"Ah, well," she said, "there are not many women who would take as much pains to prove that they were not admired by him. I know *I* should not! But, of course, I must accept what you say. And now let us talk about ourselves. Come with me into the garden, and we shall be able to discuss our affairs privately."

The hostess led the way into the pretty grounds of the villa, Jane following slowly.

She wondered how she could have been so silly and so vain as to be delighted with the dress she herself had on, with the modest jewels which she wore in honour of the visit. But on glancing round at the dresses of the other women, she noticed now that some, while well chosen and handsome, looked a little the worse for wear; and that others, which had passed muster well on a cursory inspection, revealed to a more critical eye that they were more "showy" than good. While the diamonds and pearls, of which all the ladies made even a lavish display, appeared

taken in conjunction with these new discoveries, to be rather larger than they should have been. What purported to be a thousand-pound string of pearls round the throat of one lady, for instance, seemed an incongruity when a careful inspection showed the lace on the dress to be imitation, and the foundation "silkette."

Jane finally asked herself, as she sauntered with ever slackening steps on to the terrace, whether the only real jewels in the room were not those she wore herself.

The question was a startling one, taken in conjunction with her other suspicions. And she made up her mind to be very careful about her escort on her return journey into Cannes and, above all, not to allow herself to be persuaded to wait until nightfall before she left the villa.

Madame Blanche, sunshade in hand, was sitting on the balustrade of the terrace, looking charming in the pink shade thrown by her dainty hat. Her feet, clad in pale pink, dangled in the midst of a voluminous mass of flounces and frills of lace and muslin. Whatever might be said of some of her guests, Madame at least dressed well and, moreover, expensively, and her jewellery was genuine if modest, consisting as it did of a tiny threadlike row of pearls round her throat and of a solitary diamond ring.

The contrast between her and some of her

friends in these respects was striking, and reassuring to Jane.

She did not want to think that this woman, who had been a sort of friend, was one of the sharpers. And yet—her very first words were far from reassuring:

“What a swell you are to-day, Miss Maristow! You quite take the shine out of poor little me with your lovely jewellery! You mustn’t try to make me believe that you haven’t got admirers, when you can cut us all out like this!”

Jane felt her heart beating very fast, but she decided to hear everything she could, to show no surprise at anything, and to form her own conclusions upon what was said to her.

“Then supposing I were to tell you that I had bought all my ornaments with my own money, wouldn’t you believe me?” she said.

Madame Blanche smiled.

“My dear, we women always believe all that every other woman tells us, especially on such matters as that, don’t we?” she said demurely.

“I don’t see why we shouldn’t,” said Jane. “At any rate, I have told you the truth about myself.”

Madame Blanche smiled archly and put her head on one side.

“I wonder why you take as much trouble to persuade us that you are not admired, as the rest of us do to persuade people that we are,” she said

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dreamily. "It's an idiosyncrasy, I suppose, and part of the English temperament."

It was noticeable that Madame Blanche always spoke of England and the English as if she herself had not belonged to Britain, though her French accent was doubtful, and her knowledge of London, especially of some of the suburbs, extensive and accurate.

Jane answered simply:

"I should be very glad to boast of having admirers if I had any, I assure you."

Madame Blanche was still smiling.

"I wish I could be so nobly independent," she lisped out, with quiet sarcasm, "and could buy lovely things for myself, as you can!"

Jane had no intention of informing her how she came by her money; for she guessed that her hostess, instead of being the casual acquaintance she had supposed, must have tracked her down from Monte Carlo and Madame Robert's modest establishment to the smart hotel at Cannes. And it occurred to Jane to wonder whether other people might not have done the same thing, and have wondered where this sudden splendour came from.

Madame Blanche presently went on:

"As for me, I simply dote on jewellery and every sort of lovely thing. I think you and I have much the same tastes. Only I acknowledge them frankly, and own I don't care how I get

them as long as I have them, while you—well, you're not so frank."

"I am indeed. I've told you just the truth," said Jane.

She knew that she was not believed, but she did not mind that. She was filled with the excitement of knowing that, as she thought, she had got on the track of the jewel-thieves, and she was wondering how she could make the best use of her knowledge.

Madame Blanche continued in the same strain as before.

"Well, well, I have no right to ask questions. If you say you buy your jewels yourself, it is not my affair. But tell me this: Why did you not wear your jewels before, when you were living quietly at Monte Carlo?"

Jane reddened and looked uneasy.

"I didn't know," she said, in some confusion, "that you had ever met me while I was there."

"I had heard of you, if I didn't meet you. Everyone heard the romantic story about you and Mr. Haldon."

"What romantic story?"

"How you were arrested for a supposed connection with the robbery of Lady Chilcomb's jewels, and how Mr. Haldon came to see you afterwards, just as he had done before."

Jane was about to make an indignant answer, perceiving that Madame supposed her to have

obtained the jewels from Miles either by fraud or by guile. But before she retorted, there flashed through her mind the knowledge that it would be better not to appear angry, but to make quite sure, if she could, of the extent of Madame Blanche's acquaintance with the facts, and to find out, if possible, her motives in forcing herself upon the notice of a solitary Englishwoman.

That these motives were suspicious Jane already knew. What they exactly were she could not tell.

Did Madame Blanche look upon her as an adventuress, such as Jane began to think Madame was? Did she look upon her as a rather inexpert jewel thief? Or had she made her acquaintance with the purpose of robbing her of her modest jewels?

All Jane was sure of was that the "Marquis d'Abbeville" was the man whose hand she had bitten, the man who had helped to snatch the Viscountess's jewels from her. Everything else was as yet only guesswork.

There was a slight pause before she answered Madame Blanche, and then she said :

"There is nothing very romantic about it. He was kind enough to be annoyed when he heard of the absurd mistake that had been made about me."

"Absurd indeed," agreed Madame Blanche. "As if you would take other people's jewellery when you have so much of your own."

And she cast what seemed to Jane a slightly covetous glance at the watch on her breast. Jane tried to smile, but uneasily. She was getting very shy among these dubious acquaintances.

"Surely you wouldn't compare such ornaments as I have with the jewels of a viscountess!" she said.

"Why not? I don't suppose you wear all you have. You wouldn't be so rash over here, when you are staying by yourself, too. You might be robbed, you know."

"It wouldn't be worth anyone's while," said Jane, "to take what I have. I am not the wealthy woman you seem to think, with thousands of pounds' worth of splendid stones locked up. The few I have I display rather too ostentatiously, perhaps, because I have never had many."

Madame Blanche smiled incredulously.

"You are very secretive," said she. "You are not open and candid, like me. But let me tell you, it would be wise to take me into your confidence, for there are a great many people about, in such places as this in the season, whom it is best to avoid. And my ripe experience of the Continent might be of service to you. Tell me, have you made up your mind to share the villa with me, as we had arranged?"

"You must give me time to think it over," said Jane. "And now I must be going. I have a ramshackle conveyance waiting outside, which

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brought me from Cannes. I want to get back before it is dark."

"You are quite right. Though I'm sorry you can't stay to dine with me. But you will come over again?"

"Oh, yes, I hope so."

By this time they had sauntered down from the terrace to the garden below, and at this point turned to come back to the house.

Jane made the first movement in that direction with some abruptness. As she did so she glanced at the villa and saw, at one of the upper windows, a face which she was sure was none other than that of Monsieur Verdello.

Repressing an inclination to cry aloud at the sight, Jane walked on, listening, without saying much, to the idle chatter of Madame Blanche, whose lively flatteries, which had once seemed to her half amusing, half absurd, had now become alarming and odious to the watchful Jane.

She was the first of the guests to leave the villa, and she wondered as she took leave of her hostess and got into the ancient vehicle which had brought her, what would happen when she was out of the way.

She breathed more freely when she had left the villa far behind her; but all the time the short journey lasted Jane was on the look-out for another attack.

Mechanically she passed her fingers over the

various articles of jewellery she wore, to make sure that they were all safe, so convinced was she, by this time, that the lively party at the villa consisted of adventurers and adventuresses and nothing else.

Thankful, however, as she was to be for the time out of their clutches, she set her teeth tight, and told herself that the battle with them was yet to begin, the hunt for the Viscountess's jewels still to be undertaken.

How was she, single-handed, to undertake the task? She felt that she was wholly unequal to it, and yet the finding and restoring of Lady Chilcomb's jewels was now the one great business of her life.

Of course, she knew that she could not expect that the ornaments which had been snatched from her would be found intact in the possession of the thieves who had stolen them from her person. But she might fairly hope that, now she was on the track of the thieves, a more experienced head than hers, used to such matters, might run them to earth. And she had already made up her mind not to rely upon her own resources in the search.

She would have a private inquiry agent to work with her and, not trusting any man but one of her own nationality, Jane resolved to write to a detective agency in London, requesting that an experienced man might be sent over to help her in tracking down some suspected thieves.

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What would this cost her? She trembled at the question. But the thought of being able to clear herself from suspicion was so strong a motive within her, that it overpowered all other considerations. She must show these friends of Miles Haldon's that she was not the adventuress they thought her; and she must redeem herself in her own eyes by restoring what had been lost while in her care.

With these thoughts in her mind, Jane arrived safely, in spite of her fears, at the hotel at which she was staying. She at once dispatched a letter to one of the private inquiry offices in London of which she knew the name, and waited impatiently for the help she had asked for.

CHAPTER XVI

MISS MARISTOW EMERGES

JANE passed two uneasy days after the visit to the villa of Madame Blanche. She did not wish to see that lady until she had met and consulted the detective she had sent for, and it occurred to her that the best way to avoid a premature meeting would be to change her quarters. So she left Cannes and took up her residence at Nice, going to a good hotel, and again playing the *rôle* of a well-to-do woman, which was beginning to be so pleasant to her.

Of course, she had it in her mind that she might be brought face to face at any moment with Miles Haldon and the ladies of his acquaintance; but although she knew the curiosity which the change in her appearance was bound to excite, it did not occur to her that there was any serious risk for herself to be feared in such an encounter.

Indeed, it is possible that she reflected with some satisfaction on the possibility that she might meet Miles Haldon, the Faringdons, and Lady

Chilcomb, and that they might see that the woman whom they had despised as old-fashioned and of no account was not quite so far behind the times as they supposed.

Jane was more careful this time in choosing her companions, and instead of letting herself be appropriated by the livelier sort of her fellow-guests, as she had innocently done while at Cannes, she made friends, as at Monte Carlo, with some elderly and quiet people, with whom she went about, finding life as pleasant as ever in these circumstances, in spite of the doubts and fears which still possessed her.

She caught sight of various people whom she knew, but it was not until the third day of her stay at Nice that she came face to face with any of them.

On that day she dined at a restaurant with two elderly ladies, one of whom was accompanied by her husband; and at the very next table to theirs, two minutes after their entrance, she saw a group collecting, one figure of which she recognised, while at the same time a well-remembered voice struck upon her ear.

Jane looked round quickly.

Lady Chilcomb, her husband the Viscount, Ruby Faringdon and her mother and father, and —Miles Haldon were the members of the party; and it was the voice of Miles as he spoke to Ruby which first drew her attention to them.

From where she was sitting she could not see the face of Miles, whose back was turned to her; and although Ruby and her aunt Lady Chilcomb were sitting in such a position that they could both see Jane, it was evident, although they glanced more than once in her direction, that neither of them had the least idea who she was.

Jane felt a faint glow of amusement and satisfaction at this discovery.

For the first time in her life she was dressed not only very well but very handsomely. The gown of fawn-coloured cloth which she wore was lavishly trimmed with raised embroidery in silk of shades which toned with it, while pipings of pale pink silk round the V-shaped bodice and on the elbow sleeves, and huge bows of black velvet, completed a costume which was strikingly beautiful even in the midst of many beautiful dresses. Her hair, too, which had in her lonely days always been twisted up without much regard to becomingness, was now exquisitely dressed, and surmounted by a large black hat trimmed with the modern liberal quantity of ostrich feathers.

There were diamonds in her ears and on her breast and wrists, diamonds at her throat and on her hands.

In these altered circumstances she was herself conscious that the old sorrowful, worn out Jane Maristow had disappeared, and given place to a creature in whom certain critics might have found

something to admire. Prosperity had smoothed out some of the lines in her face and rounded some of the angles; it had given light to the languid eyes and colour to the sallow cheeks, so that, while not a beautiful woman, Jane Maristow was no longer a plain one.

There was even an attractiveness about the soft, sad eyes, a look of haunting yet sweet melancholy in the whole face, that made an observer gaze again at a woman who stood out among the frivolously pretty and the consciously well-dressed, as someone who was not of the common types.

So that Jane Maristow, in her transformed state, was able to pass unrecognised by those who had known her but a few short weeks before.

She heard, without heeding it, the conversation of her own companions, for she could not help being attracted by the party at the adjoining table. She herself said very little, and spoke so low, in order that her voice should not be recognised by Miles and his companions, that it was not until dinner was nearly over that she raised it sufficiently high, while answering a question, for it to be heard at the next table.

Then Miles Haldon turned suddenly, looked, recognised her, and uttered a low cry which attracted the attention of all those at his own table, though it was not loud enough to draw upon him general notice.

Jane blushed and looked away, as he hissed out, in a sort of stupor, the one word :

“Jane!”

He had ascertained her Christian name, she reflected, as she turned to one of her own friends and began to talk hastily, though conscious of a commotion at the next table, and of voices speaking in low but excited tones.

She knew that now they all recognised her, and that they were exchanging angry comments upon her appearance. Though she could not hear a word they said, she was aware that the change in her would be criticised in no friendly spirit, and it suddenly struck her that the worst interpretation might be put upon it.

She was glad when her own companions arose, so that she could escape from a position which was becoming painful to her. But before they had reached the door, she heard rapid footsteps behind her, and the voice of Miles addressing her by name :

“Miss Maristow, may I speak to you?”

She turned at once without a word. She felt that she could not speak. He looked so deeply hurt as well as surprised, as he gazed at her, that she found no words with which to address him. So for a moment they both stood silent, and then he said :

“I don’t understand. Won’t you explain? I want to tell them what it means. They say

things hateful to me to hear. What does this change mean?"

He spoke hurriedly, in a very low voice, and no one passing would have guessed what momentous words he was uttering, nor how strong the feeling was that underlay her reply:

"The change—if there is a change, only means, Mr. Haldon, that I have had to bring myself a little up to date. What else should it mean?"

He looked at her quickly, and she was astonished to see the depth of feeling in his eyes as he answered her:

"I beg your pardon. I have no right to ask you questions. It was indeed only in order to satisfy my friends that I ventured on such an apparent impertinence. I hate to hear anything said about you but what is pleasant and kind. Forgive me."

He hesitated and half-turned as if to retreat.

Jane asked quickly: "What is it they say?"

He frowned and involuntarily clenched his fists. Then he said irritably:

"Oh, they're 'nasty', as women know how to be without exactly saying anything. You must know what I mean," he added impatiently.

"Yes, I suppose I do," said Jane slowly. "Lady Chilcomb and Miss Faringdon and Mrs. Haldon all try to insinuate, I suppose, that my fine feathers are not what the people would call 'honestly come by.' Is that it?"

He frowned again.

"My mother," he said quickly, "is not here. So she is blameless. She has gone back to England to see my brother, who's had an accident out hunting."

"I'm sorry," said Jane with conventional kindness.

"So it's only the others. But there are enough of them to make it very unpleasant for me, honouring you as I do, to have to listen."

For the first time in her life a spirit of mischief came into Jane's heart, and told her to tease him a little.

"Well, if I don't mind what they say, I don't see why you should," she said lightly.

But Miles, with an angry light in his eyes, was about to speak again, when the party to which he belonged passed close to him on the way out; and Ruby Faringdon, who was looking her loveliest in white with a big hat of pale pink, touched him lightly on the arm and, smiling into his face coquettishly, said in a low voice:

"Don't be long, dear. I shall wait for you."

Jane drew back quickly, saying:

"I mustn't keep you. My own friends are waiting, too."

But she had not taken many steps before he was beside her again.

"Miss Maristow where are you staying?" he asked imperiously.

"What does that matter?" she said coldly.

"Only this, that I must see you again to-night. Tell me where you live. I will not detain you long."

She hesitated. Her pride demanded that she should forbid this young man, who was the friend of people who despised her, who spoke ill of her, who would not know her, to come and see her at all. On the other hand, he was not to blame for the behaviour of his friends, and it hurt her to wound him. He cut short the difficulty with characteristic impetuosity.

"Look here, if you won't tell me where to come I must follow you about, that's all. I intend to see you to-night, to see you alone, and I can't be put off. It's for your own sake as well as mine."

He was very quiet, but there was earnest purpose in his eye, and Jane decided to treat him fairly.

She gave him the name of her hotel, and, turning away, rejoined her friends at the door.

Whether he did fulfil his threat to follow her, after all, in distrust or in suspicion, she did not know; but she had scarcely reached her hotel, after a short saunter with her companions in the moonlight, when she was informed that Mr. Haldon was waiting to see her in one of the small *salons*.

Jane was expecting the arrival of the private

inquiry agent from London, and had arranged that he should be shown into a private sitting-room, as the interview she had to give him was bound to be long and must be strictly private.

She went downstairs at once, and found Miles Haldon walking up and down the room at white heat.

He turned abruptly as she came in and then, springing towards her, asked sharply :

“ Whom are you expecting ? Who is the man you are waiting for ? ”

Jane was so much startled by the question and by his manner that she stammered and behaved like a frightened schoolgirl. It did not occur to her that it was the waiter who had innocently let out the fact that she was expecting a visitor, and in her momentary confusion she was at a loss.

“ Whom are you expecting ? ” he repeated savagely, to Jane’s intense surprise.

She recovered herself, and said with dignity :

“ Really, Mr. Haldon, I think that is my own affair.”

He drew back as if stung. But the next moment he had recovered himself and—watching her in a strange way that she could not understand as she quietly sat down, folded her hands, and appeared to wait for him to reveal the object of his visit—said :

“ Is it the man who gave you all these diamonds ? ”

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The question was such an amazing one to Jane that for the moment she could not answer. What did he mean? She stared at him, frowning slightly, and then said:

“Well, that is my affair, too.”

“No, it’s not. At least—I mean—I must know about it. Do you know what they are saying—the women—Lady Chilcomb and Mrs. Faringdon, about your jewellery and your dresses? It’s horrible! I can’t bear to have to tell you. But—they say—they say you are living and buying dresses and ornaments on the proceeds of the jewellery which was lost by Lady Chilcomb.”

Jane sprang to her feet with an angry exclamation. Whatever she might have thought about the impression her new magnificence might make upon her old and not very friendly acquaintances, she had never imagined anything so bad as this. She stood a moment as if transfixed, and then, turning haughtily to him, said:

“And you—is that what you think, too?”

The flash of his eyes showed her that she had done him a grave injustice.

“How can you ask such a thing?” he said indignantly.

“Well, what do you think, then?”

He frowned and hesitated, evidently half afraid to put his thoughts into words. Then suddenly he broke forth:

“It is some man who has given them to you,

someone who is in love with you. When you refused me the other day it was not true to pretend you thought yourself too old ; you knew it was not true, and you were only playing with me. The truth was that you were going to be married to another man, or at any rate that you were receiving his presents. This ring—that's from him also, I suppose ? ”

He pointed, trembling, to the handsome ring on her left hand.

Jane was so much astonished at the form his accusations were taking that at first she hardly knew what to reply. Was he serious ? Surely he must know that he was talking nonsense and that she, of all women, was not the one to attract a man and excite him to a pitch of lavish generosity !

She hardly knew what line to take with him, whether to laugh at him, or to be angry. It was too absurd. And yet, under the absurdity of it, Jane was not sure that she was displeased.

Ridiculous as it was to accuse her of taking presents from men, after all it was soothing to learn that she was looked upon as capable of inspiring passion.

But was he really serious ? It seemed too preposterous to believe it, though his eyes were flashing and his voice trembled when he spoke.

On the whole she rather enjoyed the little mystery, and not for the world would she have

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confessed the truth to him. She liked to think that he respected, esteemed her, while all the while he believed her to be poor and struggling. She waved her right hand slowly, without looking up.

“Never mind me,” she said gently. “I want to ask something about yourself. You’ve made it up with Miss Faringdon, haven’t you?”

He answered her quite snappishly:

“No, of course I haven’t. What makes you say that?”

“Well, you were sitting together at dinner, and I thought she spoke to you, and looked at you, as if it was all right again,” said Jane kindly.

He made an impatient movement, and answered in a rather sullen and morose tone:

“Oh, yes, she’s very civil now. Do you know why?”

“I hope it’s because she has made up her mind to do the only right and sensible thing, and to marry the man she loves,” said Jane earnestly.

He laughed mockingly.

“Not exactly,” he said. “She is nice now, because my poor brother has met with an accident, and she thinks he may perhaps be worse than he is.”

Jane started indignantly.

“How can you say such a thing of any woman,” she cried, “above all, of the woman you profess to love?”

Miles looked at her with a frown.

"I don't profess to love her," he said in a low voice.

"You did," retorted Jane.

"I did once, perhaps. But when you know that a girl likes you when she thinks you have a chance of a baronetcy, and grows cool when that chance fades away again, as I hope to Heaven it will, and as I think it will, why then you think things over and, if you're wise, you remain cool on your side."

Jane seemed troubled. She had looked upon him as the victim of a hopeless attachment, and it was disenchanting to hear him talk as if he had already grown cold.

"I think I'm disappointed," said she slowly, "to find you inconstant. After professing to feel so very keenly, I had expected to find you steadfast, at any rate."

He hung his head like a schoolboy under the master's fault-finding.

At that moment the door opened, and a waiter looked into the room. Jane sprang to her feet and detained him.

"Is he come?" she asked in a low voice eagerly.

He glanced at Miles and nodded mysteriously, saying under his breath that he had. Jane turned to Miles.

"I have some important business to transact," she said, holding out her hand. "I must beg you to excuse me."

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Miles arose with much *hauteur*.

"I see. I am to look upon myself as dismissed?" said he.

Without touching her hand he dashed out of the room, and with a strange wonder in her heart as to what this extraordinary emotion might mean, Jane watched him go.

what changes the years would bring, and that, while they would leave the man young and active, they would bring trouble to herself with advancing age.

Therefore she watched Miles Haldon, as he dashed passionately out of the room, with a sort of jealousy in his eyes and a swift glance of anger and suspicion and told herself, not without a secret thrill of pleasure, that he was a wayward, spoilt boy, a creature to be indulged, not taken seriously, a dear, delightful, amusing child of luxury and joy, interesting as a study to older and more mature minds, but too irresponsible and too youthful to be considered seriously as a reasoning being.

Miles had not been gone two minutes before the waiter ushered into the room a thick-set, strongly-built man with keen grey eyes, a military moustache, and a quiet and watchful manner.

A very good-looking, superior sort of man, as she ascertained as soon as he spoke. She had particularly requested that such a man should be sent, as she did not know in what capacity he might have to serve in order to find out what she wanted to know. This, evidently, was a man who could be trusted to pass as a gentleman, a highly trained man-servant, or in almost any other capacity.

He introduced himself as Henry Cross, which

was the name the head of the inquiry agency had given her, and he at once showed her his credentials, and satisfied her that he was the person she wanted.

Then there ensued a long discussion, which she opened by telling the whole of the circumstances connected with the robbery of Lady Chilcomb's jewels.

He listened attentively, taking notes all the time, and hardly looking up. From time to time he put a short question, acknowledged the reply with a bend of the head, and went on writing as before.

Then, when she had finished her narration, he looked up.

"You think these people at the villa are a doubtful lot?"

"Well, I know two men of the company were concerned in the robbery."

Mr. Cross mused.

"You think they wanted to steal your own jewellery?"

"I don't know. I looked upon this Madame Blanche as a wealthy, idle woman of good position, until I recognised the mark on the hand of one of the men I met at her house. Then I became full of suspicion, and I really don't know exactly what I think about her making friends with me, but I know there's something 'fishy' about it."

Mr. Cross mused again.

"You say you lived very quietly indeed while at Monte Carlo, and that it's only lately you have 'come out' a little, if I may so express myself?"

"Yes; I have been buying some jewellery, and dressing better, perhaps with sufficient difference to be remarked upon in fact."

"Do you think—you'll excuse my putting it to you plainly—that these people look upon you as—as—"

"An adventuress like themselves? Yes, I do think so. Madame Blanche was continually harping upon my reticence, as if I had something to conceal. I think, perhaps, she looked upon me as the person who stole the Chilcomb jewels, and she wants me to join forces with her and her gang. At least, that seems to me a possible interpretation of her behaviour. It would hardly be worth while to take a villa and make elaborate preparations, just to rob me of the ornaments I have. But it's true she persisted in thinking that I must have more than I wore. Probably she thinks if I went to stay at the villa I should take all my possessions with me, and that I should be worth plucking."

"That," said Mr. Cross, as he shut up his notebook and put it back in his pocket, "is just what I'm inclined to think. These people perhaps look upon you as much wealthier than

you admit—there is some reason in that, isn't there, since you confess you are really better off than you professed to be when you came here first?"

"Yes," said Jane.

"It seems as if their intention might be to lure you to the villa and rob you there. Or else to induce you, by some means or other, to join forces with them, if they look upon you, not as a wealthy woman, but as a very clever adventuress, who might add a considerable element of strength to their own gang."

"Well, I want you to find out, if you can, whether Lady Chilcomb's jewels can be traced to them. Have you any plan of campaign?"

"I have one, if you will assist me in it, madame."

Jane looked troubled. She would rather have been left out of the business altogether.

"How can I help?" she asked rather anxiously.

"If you will accept the invitation given you to stay at Madame Blanche's villa, I will undertake that you shall come to no harm, and you will be able to find out without any doubt what the intention of these people is. If they ask you, fairly and squarely, to join them—and if you are discreet they may do so—we shall know how we stand."

"But I should be playing the spy! I should hate that!" said Jane.

"Undoubtedly. But it is the best way out

of the difficulty. If, on the other hand, they rob you, or try to do so, I will see that you get your own back."

Jane objected strongly to the proposed arrangement, but Mr. Cross was persuasive, and he laid down his plan so clearly before her that she could not hold out; finally, with much reluctance, she agreed to consider it, and to pay another call at the villa with that idea in view.

Then the detective left her, and Jane, looking out of the window, saw him go away. She saw another figure also, that of Miles Haldon, following Mr. Cross, and her heart began to beat lest Miles should have some suspicion as to her visitor, and wonder whether the detective came to arrest her.

Although she felt ashamed of herself for these thoughts, Jane could not resist them, for she knew that Lady Chilcomb and the other ladies would be so persistent in their attacks upon her that they might end by poisoning his mind also against her. And if once he should harbour a doubt, her mysterious acquaintance from London might lead him to entertain at least a false impression of her conduct.

She was not long left in suspense upon this point.

On the very next day, while she was walking on the Promenade des Anglais with one of her elderly friends, she saw Miles Haldon coming towards them. The other lady smiled.

"Here is your ardent friend of last night," she said, turning to Jane. "He wants to talk to you. I shall leave you for ten minutes, and come back again to this spot when I have bought my papers. No, don't try to keep me. You'd better get it over if it is a lovers' quarrel. And that is what it looks like to me, whatever you may say."

It was in vain that Jane tried to protest against this decision, and the elderly lady left her to her fate.

This at once took the form of the approach of Miles, who was looking uneasy and worn, as if he had had a sleepless night.

"Why, what's the matter, Miles?" she asked, holding out her hand with a smile, though she was not feeling very easy in her mind.

"Oh, a great deal is the matter," said he. "And it's not all your fault."

Jane raised her eyebrows.

"Not *all* my fault!" echoed she with a touch of haughtiness. "Indeed, I can't suppose that your looking worried is my fault at all."

"You know better than that," said he, looking at her with a certain grave reproach which brought the red blood into her cheeks and made her look away. "You know that I'm very unhappy on your account, and you don't seem to care."

She brushed these words aside.

"What is your other trouble then?" Miss Maristow asked.

"The news about my brother isn't good," said he. "I heard this morning, and I'm to be ready at any time, on receipt of a wire, to go home."

"Why don't you go without waiting for the wire?" asked Jane quickly.

He looked at her with sudden sharp suspicion.

"Yes, that's what you want—to get rid of me," he burst out with unexpected fierceness. "But I'm not going unless it's necessary. I have work to do here."

"Indeed?"

He looked at her steadily.

"Yes," said he shortly. "I waited outside your hotel last night."

"I know. I saw you, and I wondered what made you do such a thing."

"Surely it was natural that I should wish to see the man for whom you dismissed me. And I saw him."

"Well. What of that?"

Jane spoke with some stiffness.

"Only this, that I don't know why you are not frank about him. I think you ought to be. You've made a great deal of pretence of being fond of me, and I want to know whether you're fond of him."

Jane laughed contemptuously. At least

she intended that he should think her contemptuous.

"Mr. Cross is here on business, strictly on business," she said. "He comes from London, and when he has transacted the business which brought him, he will go back there again."

"May I not be told what sort of business it is?"

She looked surprised. But a moment's reflection showed her that the question was not really so surprising as it seemed. For she had passed at first for a creature so poor, so solitary, so unversed in the ways of the world, that it was rather astonishing to find her able to bring a man over from London to the Riviera merely to discuss affairs with her, and it raised as many questions as did the change in her appearance.

And then it flashed through her mind that there was perhaps no very strong reason why Miles should not be told that this man was a detective, come over to help her in tracing the jewels belonging to Lady Chilcomb.

But Jane had set her heart upon keeping silent upon this matter until she could be sure whether she was in a position to restore the lost property. If she were to confess now, the whole piquancy would be taken out of success, if success should crown her efforts. She wanted to spring the fact upon him suddenly that she was not the humble, helpless creature she had

appeared, but a woman able and ready to make amends for the very serious loss she had innocently caused.

If, on the other hand, she should not succeed in tracing the lost jewels, she had nothing to tell.

So she decided against being too frank.

"I think," she said gently, "I would rather not tell you—yet, though I may do so some day."

He drew back, offended, snubbed.

"As you please," said he. "I do not, of course, wish to force your confidence."

Her heart failed her. He seemed so deeply hurt.

"I hope," she said kindly, "that you will soon have better news from home."

"Thank you. If I do, I shall lose the inestimable comfort and support of Ruby Faringdon's sympathy and kindness," he retorted sharply.

Jane was pained by his tone.

"It's not like you, Miles, to be so hard, so unsympathetic," said she gently.

"Isn't it? By Jove!"

This last exclamation was uttered in a different tone, and Jane, following the direction of his eyes, saw that Mr. Cross was standing not many yards away from them, looking at the sea. He was dressed in a light suit, and a Homburg panama hat, and was extremely good-looking in the full light of day.

Seeing him so unexpectedly, Jane found herself

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reddening deeply, with the consciousness that she was regarded, most absurdly, as the object of rivalry between these two men. She laughed as she turned to Miles.

“ Surely you are not going to be so absurd as to be angry with me because I manage my affairs in my own way ! ” she said.

He looked rather hurt.

“ Oh, no, of course not. I recognise the fact that I’m intruding again, as I was last night. Good-bye.”

And, raising his hat, he walked quickly away, leaving her half amused, half annoyed with him for his perverse curiosity and folly.

Mr. Cross raised his hat, and without detaining her more than half a minute, said a few words to her as to the course she was to take, and directed that she should drive out to the villa of Madame Blanche that very afternoon.

Reluctantly enough she agreed to do so, and that afternoon she drove out to the villa, where she found Madame, not indeed so smartly dressed as on her previous visit, but enthusiastic over her coming, and more effusively affectionate than ever.

It made Jane feel cold and sick to think that she herself was deliberately playing the part of a spy upon this woman ; but the more she saw and heard, the more certain she felt that she was, indeed, in the midst of a gang of swindlers, who

probably had hired the villa as their headquarters for the season.

Madame Blanche made her stay to dinner, arranged that Jane should come to spend a week with her, and before the meal was over, made her a proposition which opened Jane's eyes to the full extent as to what was required of her.

"Do you know," said Madame Blanche, leaning upon her elbow, and looking dreamily at Jane, "that when I first saw you I looked upon you as a puritanical person who took no interest in real, active, full, joyous life?"

Jane laughed.

"I had been down on my luck for a long time," said she.

"And now you are up again," said Madame slyly. "Now, do be frank with me, and tell me who it is. Where do all the pretty frocks come from? You are very sly about it; but I don't think they grow on trees."

"They don't," said Jane. "Some money was left me."

Madame Blanche laughed.

"Oh, indeed!" she said. "And how long will it last?"

"I don't quite know."

"And when it is all gone, will you go back to poverty again?" whispered Madame Blanche in her ear. "Or will you get more money—more jewels—in the same way?"

A shiver ran through Jane. But she controlled herself.

“What way?” she asked quietly.

“By persuading young men to borrow the jewels of their wealthy relations for you to sell,” hissed Madame Blanche, close in her ear.

CHAPTER XVIII

MADAME BLANCHE

Miss Maristow had been fully aware of the character of her hostess, and fully aware also, that Madame Blanche looked upon her as a woman of the same loose moral type as herself. But for all that, this deliberate and barefaced suggestion that she had stolen the Chilcomb jewels through the agency of Miles Haldon, and was living in luxury on the proceeds, filled her with so much instinctive disgust that for a moment she felt as if she must burst out into an indignant repudiation.

But she controlled herself, remembering that Cross, the detective, might even at that moment be watching and listening to them, and that, in any case, she was herself now pledged to go on in the course he and she had decided upon together.

So she contrived to simulate a half-hearted laugh and, looking down while the natural red dyed her cheeks and her eyes burned in her head, said :

“ Is that how you think I got my diamonds ? ”

Madame Blanche sat back with a triumphant laugh.

"The secret is out at last," she said. "You are quite the cleverest hand I ever met. But tell me, why did you send them back? Of course, I know you didn't send them *all* back, but you sent the pearls, and you meant to send the packet that you lost on the way. Why was that? Did you get frightened? Did you think they'd let you keep the rest without question, if you sent back the big things?"

The words froze Jane's blood; the callousness with which this woman took her guilt for granted amazed and stupefied her. At last she, mindful of the fact that she must keep up her bad character, stammered out:

"I'll tell you all about that—if you'll tell me what you did with those that Monsieur d'Abbeville took from me that night."

Madame Blanche laughed, looked a little confused, and then shrugged her shoulders:

"Well," she said at last, "those are secrets which one doesn't usually tell to outsiders. Until you identify yourself with us by coming here to stay, I look upon you still as more or less an outsider. When you stay here, I'll tell you everything."

"Until then," said Jane, trying to smile, "I'll keep my own secrets, too."

Madame Blanche had to confess that this was only fair, so she at once began to press for a date on which Jane should take up her abode at the

villa. Jane, who had arranged this matter with the detective, suggested the third day after that one, and the matter was so settled before she left the villa.

She began now to be rather nervous as to her movements, thinking it probable that these people would set a watch upon her, and dreading that they might discover the detective.

But Cross was a cautious man, and though he called to see her that evening, it was only to exchange a few words with her in one of the public rooms of the hotel, where he passed for a casual visitor, and certainly awoke no suspicions as to his profession.

On the following day Madame Blanche came into Nice, and walked with Jane, much to the embarrassment of the latter, along the Promenade. As they sauntered along, Madame looking charming in pale blue and Jane wearing a pretty costume of dust-colour, trimmed with a very little scarlet velvet, they came face to face with Lady Chilcomb and Mrs. Faringdon, Ruby's mother.

And then something happened which almost seemed to make Jane's heart stand still. For Lady Chilcomb, after a keen and disdainful look at herself, transferred her gaze to Madame Blanche, and instantly there spread over her face a great and surprising pallor, as if she had had before her eyes some terrible vision.

For an instant she stopped; she and her

companion were not yet very near Jane and hers; and then she hurriedly said a few words to Mrs. Faringdon, who uttered a slight scream and immediately put up her eyeglass to look at Madame Blanche.

It was very embarrassing for Jane, who glanced from them to her companion to see how she was affected by this meeting.

Madame Blanche, however, was perhaps used to startling surprises, for she preserved the calm and rather artificial smile which was already upon her face, and said, in a tone perfectly audible to the other two ladies, as she and Jane passed them :

“ How very oddly these Englishwomen on the Continent behave, don’t they? Wouldn’t one have thought that these two respectable old ladies had never seen another woman before? ”

Jane had nothing to say to this; she was too full of curiosity as to the meaning of the whisper and the scream.

She had previously been reluctant and ashamed to be seen out of doors in the society of the dubious Madame Blanche. Now she was on thorns to know what it was that had caused the remarkable behaviour of Lady Chilcomb and her sister-in-law.

She was not left very long in suspense. She took Madame Blanche to luncheon at one of the well-known restaurants, with a sort of dogged

obstinacy, knowing that they might be remarked upon and resolved to challenge suspicion.

Again she was seen by Lady Chilcomb, and that afternoon the Viscountess, on meeting Miles Haldon, asked him, in a tone of subdued triumph, whether he had heard of the latest acquaintance picked up by his friend, Miss Maristow.

"What acquaintance?" asked he, very pale and disturbed.

"Only a woman whom I am perfectly sure that I recognise as the wife of a swindler who was caught cheating at cards on one of the big liners during a voyage to America. They said at the time they were all sure she was worse than the man. She was suspected of picking pockets, and was avoided by everybody at last, though for the first day or two her manners and her lively conversation made all the men run after her."

"You can't be sure of this, Lady Chilcomb," said Miles hoarsely.

"I am positive," she said obstinately.

"It is because you are prejudiced against Miss Maristow, because you still think she took your jewels," asserted Miles earnestly.

"I don't say that that did not help me to find the woman out the sooner," admitted Lady Chilcomb. "But that is all. I am not easily mistaken, as I have a good memory for faces."

"What was the woman's name?" demanded Miles.

Lady Chilcomb shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, she had a dozen, I've no doubt. I don't even remember what she called herself then, except that it was a French name. But she is an adventuress, and so is Miss Maristow. If you could have any doubt before, when you saw her decked out in diamonds which she certainly had not got when she stole my jewels, you surely can have none now."

"Nothing will make me believe a word against her. She is a noble and good woman," said Miles stubbornly.

"Then how do you account for the change in her? I was inclined to agree with you, remember, and to think there might really have been some mistake, when she was a dowdy and quiet person. But now that she dresses as well as anybody here—a thing that doesn't come by instinct to anybody, mind you!—now that we see her flaunting her diamonds in the very faces of us whom she robbed——"

"No, no, Lady Chilcomb. It was not she who robbed you, it was your own niece."

The Viscountess reddened angrily.

"Too much has been made of that incident. Ruby was mad, quite mad to do what she did, which only amounted to borrowing them after all."

"But why should it be theft in Miss Maristow, when it is only borrowing in Ruby?"

Lady Chilcomb looked annoyed.

"Ruby is a gentlewoman, at any rate," she said stiffly, "and devoted to you. Surely you can't say the same of that adventuress, whatever she may pretend."

Miles flashed into sullen anger.

"Unfortunately," said he, "I can't get the smallest assurance that she is fond of me out of Miss Maristow. I wish to Heaven I could!"

Lady Chilcomb looked at him in horror. She had long since decided, with her husband, that since their niece, Ruby, had got associated with the scandal of the stolen jewels, and since everybody had been talking about her in consequence, the best thing she could do, having injured her own prospects in life in this way, was to marry Miles Haldon and have done with it. And now the illness of his elder brother, which they knew to be more serious than he supposed, made them doubly anxious for the match.

But just as they had arranged this comfortably among them, and had fully forgiven Ruby on the strength of it, ascribing her wrong-doing to a species of mental aberration consequent upon her love for Miles, they found that all their plans were threatened by the reappearance of Miss Maristow on the scene, now flaunting her true colours as a fascinating adventuress.

It was impossible for Miles to conceal the interest he took in Jane Maristow, nor did the

Chilcombs see anything impossible in the passion which they could see was threatening the young man.

Ruby, indeed, had been his ideal once, but her callous treatment of himself, her action in taking the jewels, and the easy way in which she had shuffled out of her responsibility in that matter, by an attempt to throw the blame on him, had awakened him to the heartless nature of the beauty.

"Surely, surely," said the Viscountess faintly, "you wouldn't disgrace your family by—by forming an attachment to her! By marrying her!"

"I would if she'd let me," retorted Miles.

"Ah, you're not well off enough, luckily for you. Of course, now that she is able to afford to dress—on the proceeds of my poor trinkets, I suppose—she can attract richer men than you. Can't you see for yourself what she is?"

"Oh, yes, I can. But I won't believe anything against her. If this other woman is an adventuress, as you think, she is someone Miss Maristow has picked up in ignorance. She knows very little of the world, I imagine, and is easily imposed upon. I shall go and see her, and warn her of the character of her acquaintance."

"You'd better not interfere," said Lady Chilcomb dryly. "Miss Maristow is quite old enough to know what she's about, and you will only get snubbed for your pains."

"Well, I must take my chance of that," said Miles, as he withdrew with a stubborn look on his handsome face.

He went straight to Jane's hotel, but was chilled at the very outset by meeting in the entrance the handsome man whom he had already seen hanging about, and for whom she had dismissed himself.

Miles Haldon chafed under the irritation of this man's presence, and hesitated whether he should stay to see Jane.

But his passion got the better of his pride, and he sent up a message asking her to see him.

Jane came down into the *salon* with a flush in her cheeks and a light in her eyes. She knew that there was a trying scene in store for her, since Lady Chilcomb would certainly have told him something about the friend she was with that morning. The young man burst very quickly into the object of his visit.

"I have come," said he, "to ask you to forgive another apparent impertinence. You were angry with me for asking who the man was whom you seemed to prefer to me."

"No, no. I said nothing about any preference," said Jane mildly. "I said that he had come from London to see me on business."

Miles looked at her darkly.

"Well," he said, "at any rate, I asked questions which you thought impertinent. Now I have to

be impertinent again. It's a delicate subject, and I hope you'll forgive me for being blunt over it. But do you know anything about the woman you were walking with this morning?"

The red grew deeper in Jane's cheeks.

"I know something about her, certainly," said she. "Her name is Madame Blanche, and she has been a very pleasant acquaintance of mine for some time."

"I am afraid you'll be shocked to hear that Lady Chilcomb has recognised her as the wife of a man who was taken up for card-sharping on board one of the Atlantic liners."

"Recognised her! How can she be sure? Madame Blanche said nothing to me about having recognised Lady Chilcomb!"

He frowned angrily.

"You may rely upon the information," he said stiffly. "And I strongly recommend you to give up the acquaintance at once. You are, I know, very ignorant of the world, and easily imposed upon. Your heart is too good, Miss Maristow. You have suffered already for your goodness in befriending one stranger"—and he looked into her eyes with an ardent gaze under which her own eyes fell,—"but now you may be on the eve of a greater imprudence still. Oh, for the sake of what I feel for you for your goodness to me, be warned, let me persuade you. Promise me to give up this woman."

Jane trembled as she listened. Every fibre of her being seemed to thrill at the sound of deep feeling in the young man's voice, at the look of passion in his eyes. She felt tempted to blurt out the whole truth, to tell him she knew all about the woman, to whisper to him that there was no fear of her being tricked by the specious Madame Blanche.

But even as the first words of her confession trembled on her lips, Jane became aware that a third person had glided into the room, and looking up, she saw Mr. Cross standing in a warning attitude behind Miles.

She drew herself up with a forced laugh.

"Really, Mr. Haldon," she said, addressing him by his surname instead of his Christian name, which she had been using lately, "you must trust me to choose my own friends. Don't be offended with me for saying so."

Perhaps it was a slight sound behind him, or perhaps it was the glance Jane threw at the man, which made Miles turn quickly and see the hateful stranger standing by the window. Although he appeared to be unconcerned with what was passing, Miles at once jumped to the true conclusion that there was some understanding between the two, and that it was the man who had prevented her from being more candid. So he bade Jane good-bye very curtly and, baffled and miserable, went out of the hotel.

It cut Jane to the quick to have to let him go, but the detective came up at once and strongly warned her against confiding in anybody until the work they had in hand was over.

Two days later Jane went to the villa of Madame Blanche, very uneasy and dejected, to pay her promised visit.

But Miles Haldon was far too much agitated by the interview he had had with her, and far too jealous of the unknown man who now seemed to shadow her, not to have kept watch upon her movements.

He hung about the hotel; he watched her goings out and her comings in; he spied upon her to see whether she would again meet the undesirable woman with the fair hair and the languid manner.

And when she started for the villa on the third day, with her trunks on the hired carriage, he at once resolved to track her down.

It was late that evening, after Jane had arrived at the villa—where Madame Blanche received her with effusion, and welcomed her in the most affectionate manner—that two men, prowling round the house, came into violent contact with one another in the shade of the olive trees and palms which grew thickly in the garden.

It was quite dark where the meeting took

place, and each man instinctively seized the other.

The attitude of each was sufficiently suspicious, indeed, to justify the other in thinking there was something strange about his proceedings. Both were making, at the same time, for the window of the *salon*, where the blinds were not drawn and where the two ladies might be seen from the outside, sitting together on a sofa.

"Hallo!" said Miles, as he tried to drag the other man into the light which streamed from the window.

The other man said nothing, but resisted the attempt to draw him forward where he could be seen. Miles stared into his face in the darkness.

"I know who you are," he said in a low voice. "You're the fellow who's been hanging about the hotel where Miss Maristow was staying. She says you've come from London on business. Now what business is it? Tell me that!"

The other man, however, was not communicative.

"You ought to be satisfied," he said gruffly. "It's not for me to tell you what you can't learn from the lady."

"Why are you playing the spy? Do you know enough to warn her against this woman she's come to see?"

The other did not answer.

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Miles, though without raising his voice, grew more emphatic.

“Tell me this,” he said earnestly: “Is Miss Maristow really a friend of this other woman’s?”

“Yes,” said the man shortly.

Miles drew back, shivering.

CHAPTER XIX

CAST FOR A NEW RÔL

WHILE Miles Haldon and the detective were conversing outside the villa, a momentous conversation was going on in the *salon*.

Jane, who had been advised by Cross to show her confidence in her dubious surroundings by wearing all her jewels, was resplendent in a lovely gown of pale lemon-coloured silk, with some old lace on the bodice, and wearing all the diamonds she possessed in her hair, her ears, her dress, and on her fingers.

It went to her heart to have to do this, although her common-sense told her that he was right, and that to leave her property behind her when she went to pay her promised visit would be significant of a dangerous mistrust.

She felt so nervous, however, as she sat on the sofa beside Madame Blanche, and noted how the eyes of that lady were taking an inventory of her ornaments with practised skill, even while she chatted about trifles, that the very stones

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in her ears quivered, and the gracefully hung cluster of brilliants she wore, backed by an osprey in her hair, twinkled and scintillated as she talked.

They were alone. Madame, who was not quite so well dressed as her guest, but still looked charming in a silk muslin, rather the worse for wear, and the inevitable tiny row of pearls, had given her a perfect little dinner, and seemed to find the society of the silent and nervous Jane delightful and exhilarating.

Jane did, indeed, exert herself to appear lively and without a care; but it was so difficult, in the face of what she knew and what she suspected concerning her companion, that she was glad to leave most of the talking to Madame Blanche.

Little by little this artful person brought the conversation to the important point, and began to talk about precious stones.

Jane trembled as she listened.

Madame Blanche asked her if she had ever heard of the Princess Cecina, who had made such a sensation at a recent coronation by the splendour of her world-renowned jewels.

Jane confessed that she had never even heard the name.

Madame Blanche went on to inform her that the Princess, who was a woman of middle age and very beautiful, was at Monaco, staying there for a few days on her way from Paris to Rome.

"She has her young son, Prince Gaspare, with her," went on Madame Blanche, looking deliberately at Jane, "and he is a most susceptible young man. You, who have been able to make an easy conquest of the handsomest man on the Riviera, would certainly find it even less difficult to subjugate him."

Jane shook her head.

"You overrate my powers absurdly," she said. "Mr. Haldon is not in love with me, I assure you. He looks upon me——"

"As a sister?" asked Madame mockingly. "Well, all I ask is that you should go and stay a few days in the same hotel at Monaco as the Princess Cecina and her son, and—be a sister to him."

Jane moved restlessly. But she did not know whether even then the eyes of the detective might not be upon them and his ears open for their talk; so she bowed her head, with a little shrug, and listened, with sickening disgust which she found it hard to hide, to her companion's proposals.

"You see," said Madame Blanche, "that the Princess is overpoweringly fond of her son, and can refuse him nothing. If he were to ask for the moon, she would try to get it for him. Now among the jewels of hers which are the most renowned, there is a famous tiara, in which are three most beautiful large stones. The total

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value of the tiara must be between twenty and thirty thousand pounds. We happen to know that she is carrying this with her, in order to wear it at a function where some royalties will be present. If we could get at this, we should make a very good thing of it."

"Surely such a valuable thing must be very carefully guarded," objected Jane.

"Well, it is supposed to be, of course. But it's astonishing how remiss even the most careful guardians of valuable property are at times. But we should not reckon on that, you know."

"You don't propose to take it by force, surely?" said Jane.

Madame laughed.

"Hardly," she said. "What we propose I have already hinted to you. You must establish yourself in the same hotel, and as near as possible to her suite of rooms."

"Really I don't think you would find me of much use at that sort of thing," protested Jane quickly.

"Wait till you have heard what it is that we propose. Her son is with her, a particularly lively young man. You must attract his attention."

"You had better get a more beautiful woman than I to do that."

"Oh, don't be modest. I won't say that your face is regularly beautiful according to the

classical models. But I need not tell you that there are different types of beauty, and that your thin, eager face, with its big, soft eyes, is haunting, arresting, and that, with your slow, dignified movements, your height and the exquisite taste with which you dress, you outshine pretty women as easily as if you were a renowned beauty."

Jane, disgusted with this flattery, had tried to cut her short. When she was allowed to speak, she said :

"I can assure you I have no such attraction as you think. And if I had, it requires a good deal of cleverness, much more than I have, to attract a prince."

"You shall try," said Madame confidently. "And when you have got 'in' with him, let your talk work round to jewellery, and I am sure you will be able to find some pretext for asking him to let you see his mother's jewels."

"Even if he were willing," protested Jane, "is it likely he would be able to obtain access to them?"

"I am sure he could," said Madame Blanche. "Only be persistent enough, and you will have them in your hands."

"But I couldn't run away with them! He would certainly run after me."

Madame Blanche smiled as confidently as ever.

"You had Lady Chilcomb's jewels in your hands," she said, "and the one feat is no harder

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than the other. You don't suppose you will be left alone either. You will be supported. We will see that there are two or three assistants at your back. We never work except together: Look at the neatness with which the package containing the Viscountess's jewels was taken from you. The moment Verdello got an inkling that you had the stones, he made his plans, and with the assistance of another, waylaid you and took what he wanted without more ado. You may be sure he couldn't have done so if we hadn't been well organized."

Jane listened in stupefaction. She tried to appear calm, however, as she asked:

"Why did Monsieur Verdello and Monsieur d'Abbeville rob me? If they thought I had not obtained the jewels honestly, they should have looked upon me as a fellow—h'm!—" she hesitated for a word.

"Organizer," suggested Madame.

"Yes."

"Well, they knew nothing about you then, remember. You might have been simply a fool who had got hold of the stones by accident, and who was trying to get rid of them. Indeed, that was what they did think, when they found the package was directed to Lady Chilcomb."

"Oh, I see," said Jane. "And when was it that you began to understand that I was an organizer, too?"

Madame Blanche laughed at her simplicity, which she supposed to be assumed.

"Why, when you appeared at Nice in your true colours, to be sure," said she. "Until then we had no idea who or what you were. You might have been simply a bungler who had lighted upon the jewels by accident. But when we saw how you could dress and live as soon as you had had time to realise your share of the booty, we understood that we had misjudged you."

"I see," said Jane.

"But tell me, why did you give the jewels back? I mean the greater part of them; for I suppose you did keep some. Why didn't you keep all?"

Jane was wondering what answer she could give to this. A bright idea struck her.

"Why," she said, "I found I was discovered to be in possession of them. I was looking at them with my door open, and I heard it shut. It was Monsieur Verdello looking in at me, I suppose."

Madame nodded with vivacity.

"I see," she said. "So you thought it best to make a merit of necessity, as soon as you were found out. But, my dear, what carelessness to leave the door unlocked when you were engaged like that! You will have to be more circumspect for the future, or you will never take the position your talents deserve."

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Jane smiled in answer to these compliments.

Now that she was getting used to the *rôle* of jewel-thief, she was better able to keep her countenance, and to answer steadily. Yet all the while she was wondering at the frankness with which Madame discussed the matter.

Presently she found courage to ask a question which had not yet been answered.

“Tell me,” she said, “if I succeed in getting the tiara, what will you do with it? I assure you that, in spite of the compliments you pay me, I haven’t the least idea how you go to work.”

Madame smiled again.

“How do *you*? ” she asked dryly.

“I send away the jewels,” replied Jane promptly.

“To a confederate in London, I suppose? That is risky, because packages may be opened. Besides, it isn’t wise to try to dispose of things you have borrowed until the hue and cry has died down.”

“Is that what you do—you wait? ” suggested Jane.

“Yes. We never dispose of anything until the affair has blown over. Such things as we are disposing of now have been in our keeping for years. Those that we obtained lately are put in safe keeping till they have had time to—ripen.”

Jane felt very doubtful whether there was

any truth in this account, but she listened with every appearance of belief and interest.

Then she asked :

“ And where do you keep the things while they are ripening ? ”

Madame Blanche laughed.

“ You will have to give your ‘ proofs ’ before we can trust you with that secret,” she said. “ Every member of our little society has a right to know that, but not until he or she has put his or her share to the common stock. Do you see ? ”

“ Yes,” said Jane, trying not to look disappointed.

“ When,” said Madame Blanche impressively, as she rose and opened the piano, “ you bring us—as your share—the tiara of the Princess Cecina ; then we will let you see where we mean to keep it.”

“ I am very eager to know, and I shall take care to earn the right very soon,” replied Jane, who was beginning to bear her part in the conversation with a little more show of ease.

Madame sat down to the piano and began to sing. She had not much voice, but she could sing artless little French *chansons* with point and grace, and she proceeded to amuse herself and Jane in this manner until she turned on her seat and said :

“ By-the-bye, you would like to see the rest of us, would you not ? ”

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Jane was startled. She began to wonder whether this was to be the signal for the appearance of a host of feloniously-minded friends of Madame Blanche, whether perhaps the whole of the dubious flock whom she had previously met there might not come in. In that case, would they be able to keep their hands off her modest jewels? She was so proud of these early tokens of her change of fortune that it would have gone to her heart, as she knew, to be despoiled of them.

She tried to excuse herself on the ground that she was tired. But Madame Blanche overruled her, and Jane herself wondered whether, after all, it would not be better to see and recognise once for all the different members of the gang.

So at last she consented, and Madame Blanche, without rising from the piano, began to play a vigorous and spirited march, in the middle of which the door opened, and there entered first one of the ladies she had seen at the reception on her previous visit, a woman who had evidently once been pretty but was now faded and care-worn, then Monsieur Verdello, and Monsieur d'Abbeville.

They all came, smiling, to Jane and shook hands with her, while Monsieur Verdello had the effrontery to apologise to her for the rough treatment she had experienced at the hands, as he said, of some friends of theirs who were, he assured her, not present.

But Jane knew better. The marks of her own teeth were still to be traced in the scar on the hand of Monsieur d'Abbeville, as she knew, and she had a strong suspicion that the second person who had attacked her was no other than Monsieur Verdello himself.

The faded-looking woman was dressed in a pale blue dress which had once been very handsome, but which, Jane decided with the eye of a connoisseur, had probably been purchased from the lady's maid of a woman of fashion after it had served its turn on her mistress.

She was a very quiet, watchful woman, and Jane thought that probably her part in the robberies of the gang was chiefly to keep a look-out.

Jane was wishing more and more strongly every minute that she had not allowed herself to be cajoled into helping detective Cross to carry out this plan of his for bringing the thieves to book.

To begin with, she was doubtful whether they really had any idea of making her join their gang, or whether their object was not rather to rob her of such jewels as she possessed.

She had nearly one thousand pounds' worth upon her person, and by the detective's strong persuasions she had been induced to wear all she had in the world.

It seemed to her that the faded woman looked

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with covetous eyes upon the gems; and as for the men, she felt certain that, before they had been in the room five minutes, they had reckoned up the value of each separate ornament she wore, and that either could have given off-hand a very accurate estimate of the total cost of them all.

Then she was conscious of a doubt whether Cross, the detective, experienced as he assuredly was, would be able to conceal himself from the watchful eyes of the gang. If they should discover that he was lurking outside the house, she felt that there would be small hope of escape, either for him or for her. The more she looked at the two men of the party, the more clearly she discerned traces, under the quiet manner of the one and the easy chatter of the other, of a cold, calculating and cruel greed, which lay in wait and lost no opportunity of enriching itself at the expense of others.

The faded woman had the same air of being eager to possess herself of anything of value that might come in her way. And on the whole Jane felt, with a shiver, that the artful and affected, but vivacious Madame Blanche, wicked and dishonest as she knew her to be, was by far the least repulsive of the party.

Jane wondered whether either of the two men was the husband of Madame Blanche—that husband who had been detected on board the

liner, according to Lady Chilcomb, cheating at cards.

Both of them looked quite capable of that or any other villainy, poor Jane thought, as she exerted herself to listen with attention to their stories, to laugh at their jokes, and to give rapt attention to their songs.

It amazed her, unsophisticated as she was, to find that Monsieur Verdello prided himself upon his singing of sentimental Italian songs; and that it was easy to give him real pleasure by complimenting him upon his voice, which was a fairly good baritone.

As for Monsieur d'Abbeville, he did not sing, but he showed them card tricks, which were so well done that Jane decided he must be the card-sharper of whom she had heard. But he gave no hint that he used this pretty talent other than for the amusement of his friends.

To Jane this was the strangest evening she had ever passed. All the four people round her did their best to entertain her, and she recognised the fact that, if she had not known their characters, she would have found them agreeable companions enough.

For not a word more was said by anyone concerning their professional occupations, nor had she any means of knowing whether Madame Blanche had any code by which she could inform

the rest of what had passed between her and Jane before they all came in.

But then Jane reflected that they had perhaps informed themselves by the simple expedient of listening outside the door.

As the evening wore on, it seemed to Jane, excited and nervous, as if the very lights in the room became dim, and a pall of gloom settled on the party. It was not that they talked or laughed less, or that they were less anxious to please and to entertain her. But as time wore on, the knowledge that she was in the midst of thieves, that there was not around her one single honest person, or one whom she could trust, began to oppress her spirits and chill her blood.

And although she managed to put a good face upon the matter and to listen well, if she did not talk or laugh much, she was heartily glad when the last song was sung and the evening came to an end.

Madame Blanche had installed her in a very pretty little room which looked out over the sea, and Jane threw open her window, although the night was very cold, and gazed out.

She tried in vain to discern, by straining her eyes, whether Cross, the detective, was in hiding near the house, so strongly did she feel the need for someone at hand who could come to her aid in case of need.

But of course she knew, even while she looked,

that he would not be so rash as to show himself, even if he were there.

So she shut the window again, and went to bed shivering, hoping that there was no way of getting into her room besides the door, which she carefully locked and blocked with a pile of chairs, warranted to fall with a crash at any attempt to enter.

Would she find her jewels safe in the morning ? That was what she asked herself as, ashamed of the position into which she had allowed herself to be placed, and weary and ill at ease, she laid down and tried to sleep.



CHAPTER XX

A FELON BLOW

JANE's fears proved to be groundless. In the morning she found her jewels safe and the pile of chairs still blocking the door.

She was treated with great tact, not burdened with too much of her hostess's society, while the rest of the people she had met on the previous evening did not appear at all, and Jane wondered whether they were staying at the villa, or engaged in more or less questionable operations elsewhere.

This thought appalled her. Supposing they should be discovered in some great robbery while she was actually living with Madame Blanche! Certainly there was the detective Cross to support her in her reason for being found with them, but all the same she knew that any such adventure would be very unpleasant for her.

She asked no questions about the rest of the gang, and Madame said nothing about them. She talked of the fashions, of books, of plays, of music, as if she had not a thought of anything beyond

This, to be sure, was a relief to Jane, for which she was grateful, but it was puzzling, and it left upon her mind a strange, hazy impression that she was living, not actual life, but in a dream.

And then reality came to hand with a dashing ring at the bell and a robust voice, and an impetuous, not-to-be-denied manner, in the person of Miles Haldon, who called quite early in the afternoon, and was shown into the *salon*, where Jane at that moment was sitting by herself.

She started to her feet, pale and trembling, and full of fear lest he should blurt out something uncomplimentary to her hostess, who had means, as she did not doubt, of overhearing all that passed within the villa walls.

They had left their previous conversation about the adventuress unfinished, having been interrupted by the appearance of the detective Cross; and Jane was terribly afraid that he would want to finish it there and then.

He came in with a look of intense agitation on his face, and bowed to her without speaking, looking at her the while very steadily, as if asking a question to which his eyes, rather than her tongue, would furnish the answer.

"How do you do, Mr. Haldon?" she said, more coldly than usual, for she did not wish to use his Christian name within hearing of any of the

gang. "Will you come into the grounds if you want to speak to me?"

They would be safer there, for they could talk in the open, and make sure that they were not being overheard.

No such security was possible within the walls of the villa.

"Certainly, Miss Maristow."

She flung open the window and stepped out, he following, and she went down the steps of the terrace on to the broad space of brownish grass below, where they were able to converse without fear.

"Now," she said, turning to him and speaking very gently, "what is it you have to say?"

He was in a state of great emotion, but he took his cue from her and spoke quietly:

"I think you know—you must know. You remember what I said when I met you last? You know what I told you about this Madame Blanche? Surely you must know that it isn't safe, abroad, to make friends with people in this impulsive way, and even to stay with them."

She hesitated what to reply. Not for worlds would she have told him the truth, as she knew it. He would almost have dragged her away from the villa by force if he had guessed the characters of the people who frequented and lived in it.

"I am not impulsive," she answered quietly. "I am too old."

The words made him impatient.

"You couldn't have given a better proof," said he, "that you are not old enough to travel about the world by yourself, than you have given in this move. Pray how long are you going to stay here?" As he did not get an immediate answer to this, he said more gently: "Of course, I ought to apologise for asking you such a straightforward question, since it is open to you to say, as you have said before, that it is not my business to ask."

"I won't say that," said Jane. "I won't say anything so unkind."

She had, indeed, to put strong control upon herself in order not to betray to him the intense satisfaction she felt at this visit from a friend to her in her present uncomfortable position.

Encouraged by her gentleness, he went on:

"Indeed, I hope you believe I wouldn't obtrude if I didn't feel such a very strong interest in you, and if I didn't wish so greatly for your happiness. Don't think I'm jealous: by-the-bye, I may be, but that's no matter. Well now, last night I came here——" Jane could not repress a start. "Yes, I followed you, if the truth must be told." She looked down, a crimson flush in her cheeks, but did not attempt to interrupt him. "I wanted to know why you had come, and whether you were safe. I won't press upon you again what I know about your friends, but

what I told you will make you see just why I felt anxious. I was prowling about here last night—”

“ You were ! ” cried Jane in horror. “ Oh, promise me that you won’t do it again—promise.”

“ Why not ? ”

Jane looked round her fearfully. Even as the words she meant to utter came up to her lips, she could not help reflecting, as she looked round her at the sea glistening in the sunshine, the white walls of the villa so pretty and peaceful, the olives and the palm trees in their picturesqueness, that there was something absurdly incongruous in the thought that dark deeds were committed there, or if not actually committed within its walls, were planned to their minutest details.

Slowly her eyes came round again to Miles Haldon’s handsome face, with the blue eyes full of affection and concern for her.

It was very difficult to preserve that proper measure of calm aloofness, which was the attitude she wished to keep with him, in the face of his eager solicitude and of the proof of it which he had just given.

So she had had, if she had only known it, not one, but two guardians last night !

She tried to answer in a calm, judicial tone.

“ Miles, I want you to understand that I am not the ignorant creature you, in your kindness, seem to think. I know a great deal more than

you suppose ; I am better able to take care of myself than many a woman who has seen more of the world. I thank you very much for your kindness in coming to see if I was safe, but I can assure you that I have no fear."

He was looking at her earnestly while she spoke. Then he came a step nearer, and said in a low voice :

" I can't understand, and I find it difficult to believe. But—I must tell you something. I met the man whom I took for my successful rival here last night, and I asked him—whether this woman, this Madame Blanche, was your friend. And he said she was. Is it true ? "

The truth could not be told, yet she must satisfy him if she could. She met his steady gaze with her own.

" I won't answer you," she said simply. " But I will ask you to trust me."

He breathed a sigh of relief.

Then his manner changed, and in his eyes she saw a look no longer anxious, but more affectionate than ever.

" Miss Maristow," said he, " I suppose I've misjudged you, and you are cleverer than you pretend. You have some reason for coming here, I can see. I'm sorry you've had to come, but I shan't worry myself about it any more."

" That's right," said she. " Indeed, there's no need—as far as I know."

She felt compelled to add that doubtful little speech, which woke his fears again.

He looked earnestly into her face.

"But I wish," he said softly, "that there was no need to keep secrets from me. I wish that you would care for me as much as I care for you. At first I was jealous of that good-looking fellow, but when I spoke to him last night I found that, though he is a decent chap and all that, he was not quite—what I need be jealous of."

The red blood rushed to Jane's cheeks once more. His persistence pleased her while it harassed her.

"You were right not to be jealous," she said quietly. "The idea is absurd."

Miles Haldon, regardless of the anxious glance she cast back at the villa, coaxed her to come a little farther away, where they were sheltered from the house by some trees and shrubs. Then he turned to her passionately:

"Why won't you give way?" he asked vehemently. "I see in your eyes that you like me. Why won't you let yourself go, and love me, and let me make you happy? I could, you know."

For a moment she wavered, all but overcome by the impetuosity of the man in whom she could not deny that she took a warm and even a tender interest. But her old diffidence, prudence,

aided by the knowledge that she was engaged in a plot of which neither he nor his friends could have thought but with horror, came to her assistance, and she drew herself up, and shaking her head slightly, said :

“ No, no, no. I can give you no other answer, at any time. I want you to remain my friend, and you may find it difficult to do that some day, I warn you. But you can be no more to me than that. Now I must send you away. I thank you for your kind thought for me. Good-bye.”

She had already led the way back into the open ground, so that he had to restrain the vehemence of the feelings which she could guess at from the convulsive workings of his features.

As quickly as she could, very nervous lest Madame Blanche should meet and detain him, she dismissed him, and going up to her own room, burst into an agony of tears, such as she never remembered shedding before.

She had had to do it ; there was no alternative, his affection was absurd, was ill-judged, was a mushroom growth which would die away when once he and she were a few more miles apart. Yet the sweetness of the feelings his boyish passion inspired, fight against them as she might and did, made it hard to bear up as she knew she must, to be prudent and wise, and to say “ No.”

It was fortunate for her, however, that she had avoided complications of the kind, for that very day she was informed that she must proceed to Monaco, as the Princess Cecina had already arrived there.

Jane, not sorry to leave the villa, did as she was ordered to do, and installed herself in the hotel where the Princess and her son were staying.

She wondered how she would be able to communicate with Cross, for she knew that while at the hotel she would be under the constant surveillance of the gang of which she was supposed to be a member.

But the detective knew his business, and she found a note from him before she had been twelve hours at the hotel, telling her that he had followed her, giving her his address, and asking her to inform him at once of the reason of this new move.

She answered with bare and guarded details, and in the meantime pursued successfully the plan of action she had mapped out.

It was easy, as Madame Blanche had informed her it would be, to attract the attention of the young Prince Gaspare ; the more so that there was a curious attraction about Jane, in her dignity and unlikeness to other women, which made her, in conjunction with her taste in dress, a conspicuous and curiosity-awakening figure.

She found no difficulty in getting into conversation with him and, finding him little more than a high-spirited and charming boy, soon contrived to make great friends with him and then, taking advantage of this friendship, she quietly warned him to persuade the Princess, his mother, to resume their journey as quickly as possible, as there were thieves on the watch to rob her of her jewels.

The lad was clever enough to take the news rightly, and at once communicated with his mother, with the result that they were out of the hotel, and on their way towards Rome within a couple of hours of Jane's welcome caution.

Then, rather anxiously, she waited for the result of this move.

Guessing that her failure to obtain the Princess's jewels for the gang would injure her chance of gaining their confidence concerning the hiding-place of their stolen treasure, she had prepared a plan of action.

At once leaving the hotel and returning to the villa, on the second day after she had left it, she informed Madame Blanche, whom she found in the *salon* alone an hour before dinner-time, that she had failed in her attempt to capture the Princess Cecina's famous tiara.

"So I had already heard," said Madame Blanche, so coldly that Jane's heart sank, as she

told herself that her treachery to the confederates must be known also.

Jane rushed on with her story.

"But for all that," she said, "I've not come back empty-handed. As the Princess went away I found another rich woman there, and I've brought you something that I think you will accept as my first proof of what I can do."

Madame Blanche's face, which had darkened with something uncannily like suspicion, cleared a little, as Jane drew forth from a little bag she carried a beautiful cross set with large diamonds, which she had herself procured from a jeweller's at the price of forty thousand francs, and held it in the lamp-light for admiration.

Her hostess instinctively put out her hands towards the glittering ornament. But Jane would not give it up.

"No, no," she said, "Mr. Verdello must see it first. It must be accepted as my first contribution to the common stock, and in return for it I must have what he promised me I should have when I brought the Princess's tiara, a sight of the treasure-house where the jewels are kept pending negotiation."

Madame Blanche laughed a little half-heartedly. She seemed disconcerted, and made some excuses about there being no rule of that kind, and no need for such displays to assure Jane of their good faith.

But Jane was obstinate, and in the end Madame Blanche agreed to inform Monsieur Verdello of her decision.

Then Jane was shown to the room she had occupied during her short stay at the villa, and prepared to dress.

When she came down again she found Monsieur Verdello and also Monsieur d'Abbeville, who greeted her as before, without any reference to the subject of jewels.

The four dined together, and then, when they had gone to the *salon*, Monsieur Verdello took Jane aside and asked to see the diamond cross she had brought.

"I will show it to you, and give it up to you, Monsieur," said Jane firmly, "when you fulfil the promise to show me where you keep the jewels we have obtained possession of."

He made excuses, said they were not at the villa at all, and tried to prevail upon her to yield. But as she stood firm a disagreeable expression came over his face, as he shrugged his shoulders and admitted that she had a right to do what she wanted.

He then said shortly, "Come this way," and led her out of the room and into a small cellar, where he unlocked a safe and showed her a mass of sparkling ornaments, among which she recognised the emerald and diamond brooch belonging to Lady Chilcomb.

Rather surprised at the ease with which she had at last attained her object, Jane allowed Monsieur Verdello to wrench from her hand, rather than quietly take, the diamond cross, as, with a nod, he glanced towards the stairs. She turned to go up, when a stunning blow from behind knocked her senseless on the floor.

CHAPTER XXI

TO THE RESCUE!

THE cellar into which Jane had been led, and in which the safe containing the jewels had been deposited, was a little shallow space at the bottom of a stone staircase, with a door at the top only.

This door was at the end of a short, dark passage leading from the entrance hall of the villa, and it had been carefully closed by Monsieur Verdello.

It was at the bottom of this stone staircase that Jane fell, when she was struck down by the blow from behind.

She could only utter a sort of gasp before she became unconscious, falling with a thud upon the stone floor of the cellar.

When she again became half conscious of what was going on around her, Jane, without opening her eyes, was aware that some kind of conflict was in progress, and thinking herself in a dream she listened dully to the sound of a scuffle of angry, broken words, uttered in English, French

and Italian, and of blows and cries of rage and pain.

When she opened her eyes she found that she herself was lying huddled up in a corner by the side of the stone staircase, and that an animated struggle was going on within a few feet of her.

The cellar was lighted by a grating which let in the rays of the sun by day, and at night by a couple of candles which stood in common earthenware candlesticks on a shelf against the wall.

Now the long-wicked candles were flickering furiously in the draught caused by the rapid movements of four men, who were all engaged in a hand-to-hand combat.

Sliding, slipping, grasping each other, the four men, in whom she recognised Verdello, d'Abbeville and Cross and Miles Haldon, were by means ill-matched.

Cross and Miles Haldon had the advantage in stature and muscular strength, but they were no match for the Frenchman and the Italian in quickness and agility.

While Miles Haldon was a very good boxer, according to English rules, d'Abbeville, on his side, was a clever exponent of the art of "*la savate*," while Cross and Verdello, who were opposed the one to the other, presented a similar contrast in methods.

Jane sat up in her corner and watched with gradually returning intelligence.

At first the combat scarcely interested her ; it was merely bewildering to see these four men scuffling, in deadly earnest, in the murky and dim light of two flickering candles.

But as consciousness came slowly back, she began to perceive that this conflict was not unconcerned with herself, that, indeed, it was an affair in which she was actually interested.

She scrambled to her knees, and stared at them with ever-increasing excitement.

Miles Haldon ! Cross, the detective ! Why, they were here on her account, surely ! They must have heard her—she must have uttered some cry ; they must have got into the house and come to her assistance.

By this time the fact was clear to her mind : as d'Abbeville had come to the aid of his accomplice, Verdello, so had Cross and Miles Haldon forced their way in and come to her aid.

She stood on her feet gazing spellbound.

Then she began to perceive signs on the enemy's part of getting the worst of it, and there arose from both d'Abbeville and Verdello loud cries for help.

They spoke in French, and Jane listened, wondering who would be the next person on the scene. She was still in too heavy and stupefied a condition to take any active part in what was going on. Conscious that her head was aching violently, that she felt giddy and sick, she clung to the side of the

stone staircase, which had no rail or balustrade, and watched the proceedings.

Suddenly, however, her ear caught the sound of approaching footsteps above her, and she began to understand that the arrival of another person would make the odds unfair. There were at present two fighting with two ; but if Verdello and d'Abbeville should obtain additional help, the two Englishmen would have a hard battle to hold their own.

Jane, her brain growing ever clearer, decided what to do.

There was a bolt on the door at the top of the steps, on the inner side, just in front of the footsteps in the passage above. Miss Maristow tottered up and shot the bolt.

The sharp, thin voice of Madame Blanche cried out from the other side :

“ Let me in, let me in.”

The cry made the men look round, and Miles Haldon, seeing Jane, called to her by name. At the same moment he got the better of his antagonist, and hurled him to the ground with so much force that d'Abbeville lay motionless, while Miles, turning to the other two men, who were still struggling, gave his aid to Cross, so that in a very few minutes Verdello also was mastered and flung to the floor, where he was held down by the detective.

Miles, meanwhile, looked round him for some-

thing to bind Verdello's hands. Jane, from her post of vantage at the top of the steps, could see all over the cellar and pointed to a piece of ragged rope that lay beside the candles on the shelf.

With this rope Cross bound the hands of Verdello, while Madame Blanche, growing ever more shrill, continued to strike blows on the door, which rattled but did not give way.

"Who is there?" cried she, resting from her efforts to listen.

Verdello answered in a voice which betrayed sufficiently the exertions he had made; his reply being in French, with a good deal of slang, was intelligible only in part to Jane, who gathered that he made complaint of her own treachery, and stated that he and his companion had been set upon by two thieves. He also wanted to know how many persons were in the house, and why they had not come to help him and d'Abbeville.

Madame's rapid reply was to the effect that there was nobody in the house but a couple of maids, whom she dare not call as she could not trust them. In the meantime Jane, obedient to a sign from the detective, came down the steps, and stood, trembling and dazed, beside Miles Haldon, who was endeavouring to discover whether d'Abbeville was dead, insensible, or only shamming.

He came to the conclusion that he was really stunned, and that there was no danger to be apprehended from him for the present.

A brief consultation took place in a corner between him and the detective. There was no time to be lost. They must take the thieves outside and send a messenger without delay to Nice for aid from the police.

Although no word had as yet passed between themselves and Jane on the subject of the safe, and they knew nothing but that it was there, that Jane had been knocked down, and that a man had come to the assistance of his comrade when they forced an entrance into the villa by one of the windows and made straight for the cellar, they were well aware of the sort of gentry with whom they had to deal.

After their hurried consultation, Cross came over to Jane and whispered in her ear:

“Can you be left alone in the house with the woman who calls herself Madame Blanche? I must go to Nice for assistance, but will leave Mr. Haldon here to look after these two men. What shall I do with you?”

“Leave me here, too,” replied Jane promptly.

The detective looked scrutinisingly into her face:

“Better not stay,” he said warningly: “This chap on the floor may come to, and then there will be trouble.”

“Mr. Haldon in that case may have to deal with two of them!” said Jane.

“Well, he can look out for himself.”

Jane hesitated.

"Give me something," she whispered, "something with which I could strike a blow."

He whispered back :

"Could you fire a revolver?"

"I've only tried once," she answered in the same tone. "But I could do it if I had to. At any rate, I might help to keep these two men in order if I had one."

Cross whipped a little weapon out of his pocket, put it into her hand, and gave her some brief instructions. Verdello, on the floor, with his hands bound, could not see what was taking place, but appeared to have some idea of what it was, for he gave a loud shout, and told Madame Blanche that he and his companion were going to be murdered by the English people. He desired her to fetch his revolver, and she, uttering little screams, ran away down the passage, the pit-a-pat of her high heels sounding along the polished floor.

Cross took advantage of the opportunity, and darting up the stone steps, went out, instructing Jane to bolt the door again behind him, and telling her aloud not to be afraid to fire if she were attacked.

With that he disappeared and Jane shot the bolt once more.

Verdello, who had heard the detective's parting instructions, became incoherently abusive and violent as he rolled along the floor, trying in vain to free himself from the rope with which

his hands and feet had been bound. He freely called Jane a traitress, a mean wretch, and threatened her with penalties untold unless she unbolted the door.

Jane stood firm. Pale and trembling, and unable to stand unsupported, she leaned against the door, and holding her hand within the bosom of her dress, tightly clutching the revolver, fixed her eyes steadily on Verdello, and said not a word in answer to his tirades.

In the meantime Miles Haldon, whose face was bruised and bleeding, was in charge of the second man. He glanced from time to time at Jane, but did not speak to her, thinking it better that they should keep undivided attention for the task before them.

Before many minutes had passed they heard the high heels again in the passage above, and Madame Blanche cried through the door :

“Open, open. I am here. I have what you want.”

“Fire through the door,” shouted Verdello in French.

There was a moment of intense excitement, and Miles Haldon told Jane to come down. But she was resolute, and perhaps guessed the truth that Madame Blanche had not so much physical courage as her share in the disreputable work of the gang would have seemed to imply. They heard her fumbling outside, sighing, uttering little

ejaculations ; but she only shook the door again, thumped at it with her fists, and did not attempt any further attack.

Verdello cursed and swore fluently in Italian and French, but his fiercest denunciations and threats only drew sobs from Madame Blanche, who presently mumbled something about keeping a look-out and went away.

Jane trembled lest she should either find more courageous companions, or come back with greater nerve.

In the meantime she and her companions waited quietly, in a strange and uncanny silence. One of the candles flickered, flared up for a few seconds, and then went out. The dim light of the remaining candle was all they had, and involuntarily they all three measured the length of it with straining eyes.

It would be awful to be left in the darkness, they four, one man lying insensible, another bound, and the remaining man and woman alone with them !

For a time there was dead silence in the cellar, and then Miles Haldon went to the safe and touched it.

The action brought a wild yell of anger and dismay from Verdello. Jane remained silently watching the two men.

“ This is where you keep your plunder, I suppose,” said Miles.

Verdello cursed under his breath, but gave no clearer answer.

Miles now kept his station close to the safe, and mounted guard over it, while Verdello tried in vain to look unconcerned. Still the man on the floor lay still, and Jane held watch by the door.

The minutes grew into half an hour, into an hour, and still they waited and watched ; Verdello had grown strangely quiet, and the others watched him the more closely, wondering whether he had some ugly trick in preparation.

In the meantime they heard no more of the footsteps of Madame Blanche, and it began to seem to all of them that the villa was strangely quiet.

The slight noises which are to be heard from time to time in every house, the closing of a door or a window, the clatter of cups and dishes, the noise of a footstep or a voice, came no longer to their ears.

It was as if they were in a dwelling of the dead rather than the living.

It was evident at last that Verdello's tranquillity was the outcome of intense nervousness, and the spirits of the other two began to rise a little from the dead level of depression into which they had sunk.

What was a bad sign for him was a good one for them.

Still neither Miles nor Jane spoke.

The silence was growing terrible, yet they seemed afraid to break it, till at last slight sounds as of approaching footsteps came to their ears.

Verdello, in a fever of hope, raised himself upon his elbow, straining his ears to listen. Miles started forward and sprang up the steps to Jane.

Miss Maristow was so worn out, so unnerved, that she began to shrink and to tremble at his approach, and breathed a little sigh at the prospect of anything which would relieve the tension.

Miles put his arm round her, supporting her gently.

“Hush!” he whispered. “It’s all right, I think.”

The next moment he had recognised the voice of Cross outside and drew the bolt of the door and threw it open.

There was no light outside, the lamp having been extinguished, no doubt by Madame Blanche as she went away from the cellar-door.

But a question from Miles Haldon quickly dispelled Jane’s fears. It was Cross, back from Nice with a score of police.

Jane was led out of the cellar by Miles, who took her, by her directions, into the *salon*, where she found some matches, struck a light, and found some candles for him with which he returned to the cellar.

She herself, shivering and dazed, with a headache which made her sick and faint, lighted another pair of candles for herself, and sat down on the sofa.

It was a weird experience. The house seemed deserted. The *salon* was tenantless; so was the little room communicating with it. Jane wondered whether she dared explore farther, but decided against the experiment and sat down again.

The cellar was almost underneath the *salon*, and she heard a violent commotion going on there, the voice of Verdello, and the voices of strangers —those of Miles Haldon and Cross, the detective, also. For the window of the room was wide open, and the grating of the cellar below, being unglazed, allowed every sound to travel outwards and upwards.

But she was not kept in suspense much longer. The conflict which took place now was short and sharp, being, indeed, absolutely one-sided since the appearance of the guardians of the law.

Within a few minutes Verdello and the now half-conscious d'Abbeville were brought out, led or carried upstairs, and the safe, which was a small portable one, and evidently recently placed in the cellar, was brought up by the policemen, and placed in the vehicle in which they had ridden to the villa.

Verdello and his companion, having been revived by a draught of wine, were invited to take their places in the car, and while a few of the policemen went with them as an escort, Cross and the rest made a minute examination of the villa.

This revealed an extraordinary state of things. Not a living creature was to be found in any of the rooms, and it was plain that the other members of the gang, together with the servants, had decided upon flight.

Before the search had been completed, Jane had given unmistakable signs of exhaustion by losing consciousness two or three times.

On being asked where she would like to be taken, she replied that she did not know and finally, by Miles Haldon's suggestion, it was decided to send for a nurse, and to leave her at the villa itself, which would be for the night in charge of the police, and therefore as safe a spot as could be chosen for the invalid.

When this was settled Jane herself was almost beyond caring what became of her, and she was fading once more into unconsciousness when the passionate kiss of Miles Haldon upon her face, and his farewell whisper, for an instant revived her.

“Good-bye, good-bye, my darling ! ”

CHAPTER XXII

WHICH WILL HE MARRY?

MILES HALDON went straight back to Nice, and, late as the hour was, called upon Lady Chilcomb to tell her what had happened.

Although he had as yet found no opportunity of conversing with Jane about the jewel-thieves, he began to see clearly enough what it was that she had done, and he rightly judged that she must have had in her mind the tracking down of the men who had robbed her of the Viscountess's diamonds.

He therefore thought he should have little difficulty in persuading Lady Chilcomb and her husband of the disinterestedness of Jane, and that he should be able to make powerful friends for her with the aid of the information he had brought.

He was rather surprised to find both the Viscount and his wife in their private sitting-room at their hotel; for, as Lady Chilcomb's hours were early, he had expected to find that she had retired to rest, and had counted on being able

to have some conversation with her husband in the first place.

Viscount Chilcomb had from the first been more severe upon Ruby than his wife was, and more indulgent towards Jane.

As it was, however, there was no help for it; Miles must face husband and wife together, nay, he must even speak in the hearing of two other persons, since, as he advanced into the room, he saw that the Viscount's brother and sister-in-law, the Honourable Charles and Mrs. Faringdon, were there also.

He was surprised at this belated family party, and at first was inclined to withdraw and to postpone his narrative until the morning.

They, however, would not hear of this, and one and all were quite unusually kind.

Mrs. Faringdon, in particular, told him he looked terribly ill and worn-out, and asked with much solicitude the meaning of the bruises and scratches on his face and hands, and of the general state of disorder in which he presented himself.

"I have been in a scuffle," he said, "with a gang of thieves."

And forthwith he proceeded to tell them that he believed he had got upon the track of the robbers who had stolen the jewels of Lady Chilcomb.

There was general excitement over the news, and a chorus arose asking for details.

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He scarcely knew where to begin, for he was anxious to tell his story in such a manner as to gain everybody's sympathy for poor Jane.

In the midst of the inquiries, and while he was still hesitating how to begin, Lady Chilcomb asked rather sharply:

"And this Miss Maristow, from whom they were stolen—where is she at present?"

The question was most unfortunate, and it threw him into a state of pitiable confusion. It was difficult to see how they would take the truth, that he had found her in the very villa with the thieves.

His hesitancy increased the general curiosity. There came a dead silence after the Babel of tongues.

Then he collected his thoughts, and answered:

"It was Miss Maristow who led me to the house where the robbers keep their booty. For that is what it amounts to, I suppose."

"But where is she now?" demanded Lady Chilcomb again.

"Well, she is so ill as the result of her exertions on your behalf, Lady Chilcomb, that we had to leave her behind at the villa, in charge of a nurse."

They all fixed upon the young man, who was much confused, eyes full of chilling inquiry.

"You left her at the villa. What villa?" asked Lady Chilcomb.

"The villa where we seized the thieves, and the safe they had. Some of the gang—the leaders, as we believe—are now in the hands of the police. Miss Maristow was knocked down by one of them, and seriously hurt, but she contrived to bear up long enough to give me great help by keeping off the rest of the gang while I sent for the police."

There was a look of general bewilderment, not unmingled with incredulity, at this news. Not one of those present had ever doubted that Jane Maristow was an adventuress, and that she had profited by the theft of the jewels. Thus, while the thieves themselves believed that she was living upon the proceeds of other robberies, Lady Chilcomb and her friends thought she was living on the jewels stolen from the Viscountess. If they were really taken from her person, as she said, they thought this was only a blind, and that the person who took them was one of Jane's confederates, who afterwards shared out the proceeds with her.

"I don't quite understand the share Miss Maristow had in these proceedings," said the Viscountess icily. "Pray tell me the story from the beginning."

Not without fears that there were unexplained points in it, Miles obeyed.

"Well, I knew she was on the track of the thieves," said he desperately, "and that she was

being helped by a man whom she sent for from England for that purpose."

The looks of incredulity grew more marked.

But he went on :

"I followed her to the villa——"

"To the thieves' villa?"

"She was there to play the spy upon them to find your jewels, as I fully believe, Lady Chilcomb."

"Most extraordinary!" said Mr. Faringdon.

"I was watching outside," went on Miles, without heeding, "when I heard her cry out and fall. I got into the villa by means of an open window, and found Miss Maristow lying stunned on the floor of a cellar, with one of the thieves standing over her and another coming in. Luckily I had her own detective to help me. As it was, we made a good fight of it, and with the assistance of Miss Maristow, who barred the door for us, we got the best of it. We stunned one man, bound the other, and then the detective went for the Nice police, while Miss Maristow and I kept guard over our prisoners."

"Very extraordinary!" said Mr. Faringdon again.

Lady Chilcomb laughed.

"And do you really suppose," said she scornfully, "that she was not really their accomplice, and that when she was knocked down it was not merely a rogues' quarrel?"

"I am sure it was not," said Miles quietly. "And I think, Lady Chilcomb, when you know all the circumstances, you will be sorry for having made such a suggestion. She deliberately put herself into the power of these wretches in order to find out what had become of your diamonds—she has not told me so, but I can swear to the truth of this explanation—and through her daring and courage, I think we have probably come upon the track of them. For all I know, some of them may be locked up in the very safe which is now in the keeping of the police. It was not thought advisable to make any attempt to open it at the villa, so the police took it away with them."

Lady Chilcomb, however, was quite unconvinced.

"Even if we were to find the things," she said, "it wouldn't help to prove that Miss Maristow knew nothing about it. I can't understand how you can take this woman's part in the enthusiastic fashion you do, when you know so little about her."

"I beg your pardon. I know all about her, and I know that a nobler-minded woman never lived."

Mrs. Faringdon, who had been growing restless while Miles took up the cudgels on behalf of Jane, now interposed.

"I'm quite sure Miles thinks Miss Maristow

all that he says she is, and we all hope he may be right. For my part, I am going to try to see matters with his eyes, and I propose to call at this villa, wherever it is, to-morrow morning, to see how she is, and if there is anything I can do for her."

Miles turned to her with a heightened colour and with gratitude in his eyes.

"Thank you, Mrs. Faringdon, thank you a thousand times," said he, surprised and delighted with her gentleness, which was in marked contrast to Lady Chilcomb's hardness.

However, the Viscountess suddenly said that she would go too, and Miles, although he thought that Jane would rather have been spared her formidable visitor, affected to thank her also for her offer.

And then it occurred to him to wonder again how it was that they were all in family conclave at so late an hour.

"I had been afraid," he said, turning to Lady Chilcomb, "that I might not find any of you up."

There was a general sense of uneasiness upon the party, and the faces around him began to compose themselves into a sort of conventional gloom.

"Is anything the matter? Has anything happened?" he asked quickly.

Mrs. Faringdon rose hastily with a sigh.

"I'll send Ruby to speak to you," she said.

Miles, who had been offered a chair, rose to his feet quickly, with a dull foreboding at his heart. Nobody else spoke, and Mrs. Faringdon beckoned Miles to follow her into the corridor, and called to Ruby, who was in the next room, talking to her aunt's maid, as it seemed to Miles, who caught the sound of her voice, in quite her ordinary, flippant and lively manner.

To his surprise, however, when Mrs. Faringdon put her head into the room and called her daughter, saying a few words to her in a low voice, Ruby came out looking the picture of misery. She at once threw her arms round his neck and said to him with every appearance of acute distress :

"Dear, dear Miles, bear it as well as you can. We've had bad news."

Having had his thoughts taken up with other things, Miles had forgotten the invalid at home in England. With a sudden horrible foreboding, he looked down at her and said hoarsely :

"Bad news. Of whom? My brother!"

"Yes, Miles, dear Miles. I'm dreadfully, dreadfully sorry for you."

But Miles was not responsive. He gently disengaged her arms from his neck, and asked gravely :

"Not worse? Not—dead?"

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She bowed her head, and if she did not sob she seemed to do so.

With a hasty apology he drew back at once.

"I must start for England by the first train," said he.

"Oh, no, no, there is surely no need now. What could you do?"

But Miles did not heed her. He had, indeed, almost forgotten her presence, except as that of a person to whom he could talk of his plans.

"My poor mother. She'll want someone to comfort her," he said. "When did it happen?"

"Aunt got a telegram, and sent for us, knowing how much we——"

"Yes; thank you all very much," said Miles. "And now I must get ready and find out about trains. Good-night and good-bye."

She would have given him a tender farewell, but he allowed her no time. With a handshake which showed him absorbed in his thoughts, he went quickly away, and they none of them saw him again before he started on his journey to England.

The ladies were troubled by his lack of interest in Ruby. They had secretly welcomed the news as giving Miles the position which the husband of Ruby, the beauty, ought to have in the world, and had all felt gratified that the marriage was now bound to take place.

Perhaps there were certain vague doubts in the

minds of the two elder ladies, not unconnected with the dangerous adventuress at the thieves' villa. But his absence in England afforded a splendid opportunity of shaking her off, and they set about carrying out their plan without delay.

The very next morning Lady Chilcomb and Mrs. Faringdon descended upon the villa, anxious if possible to send Miss Maristow away from the neighbourhood before Miles Haldon could return.

They learned that Miss Maristow was in bed, but when they sent up kind messages and asked if they could see her, she at once sent down word that she would be pleased if they would come upstairs.

They found her looking very pale and haggard, and complaining of severe headache.

Both ladies had, of course, whatever they might feel, to affect great sympathy, and to express their appreciation of her courage.

"I understand," said Mrs. Faringdon, "that you were actually living with these people who have been arrested."

"I don't think the two men who have been caught did live here," answered Jane. "The house was supposed to be kept by a woman who called herself Madame Blanche, and who, I'm told, was recognised by you, Lady Chilcomb, as the wife of a swindler who was caught cheating at cards on an Atlantic liner."

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Lady Chilcomb was rather taken aback by this frankness.

"Yes," she said, "I'm sure she is the same person."

"Very likely," said Jane. "She was certainly used to this sort of work, and she thought I was too, and asked me to steal the jewels of the Princess Cecina, when she was staying at Monaco. Instead of that, I warned the princess's son, and they both went away at once. That made Madame Blanche suspicious of me, and when I came back to the villa and asked to see the thieves' treasure, to which I had contributed a diamond cross, which I bought myself, I was knocked down and stunned by one of the gang. I cried out, luckily for me, and both the detective, whom I had brought from England to help me, and Mr. Miles Haldon, heard me from outside and broke in to my assistance."

This narrative, so simply and briefly given, surprised and disconcerted her visitors, who had come prepared to look upon her as an artful adventuress, out of whom they must worm all they could.

No arts had been necessary to make her speak: she told them her story, and then lay back, silent and rather exhausted by the effort.

"Where is Mr. Haldon now?" asked Jane after a pause, during which both her visitors had wondered exactly how they should take this recital.

"He has gone back to England," said Mrs. Faringdon quickly. "His brother is dead."

"Oh!" cried Jane, much interested and moved. "He will be much distressed. He was so fond of him."

"Well, the truth is it was expected," said Mrs. Faringdon. "When my daughter, to whom he is engaged, threw her arms round his neck and told him the news he seemed stunned at first, but he soon recovered and decided that he must go back to comfort his mother."

"Of course. And so he is engaged to Miss Faringdon after all?" asked Jane, raising herself a little, and looking gravely and wistfully into Mrs. Faringdon's face.

Her gaze was too straightforward for a lie to be persisted in.

"Well, not formally perhaps, but I think it amounts to that. You see his position has improved," she said.

"Yes, yes, of course. He will be a baronet now, will he not?"

"In the ordinary course of events, yes."

Lady Chilcomb was rather displeased with her sister-in-law for taking things for granted so promptly. She herself wished for the match, but she did not feel quite so sure as Mrs. Faringdon that it would come off. She thought a little diplomacy might be necessary.

"I think," she now said, interposing, "that

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there can be no question the match would be a suitable one for him, and likely to make him happy. If you are the friend of his he declares you to be, Miss Maristow, I hope you will agree with us."

"Indeed I do," said Jane, with a strange, sweet wistfulness still in her eyes. "I agree with you that, if he loves her, it will be a happy thing for him to marry her. And—if she loves him."

As she uttered the last words, she looked gravely into the lady's face. Lady Chilcomb watched her with interest, but Mrs. Faringdon spoke rather shortly in reply.

"Oh, of course she does. There has been only one thing in the way of their marriage, that he has not been in a position to support a wife. But now she has determined to waive that, and though they will be very poor, they will be happy in each other's love."

"Will they be very poor?" asked Jane with interest.

"Very poor indeed, considering their position," replied Mrs. Faringdon with decision. "The poor fellow has nothing, and though he will have his father's title some day, he will have little besides."

Jane leaned back. She looked worn and tired. Lady Chilcomb rose, saying they must not fatigue her by a long visit, and asked if there were anything they could do for her.

Jane said there was nothing, and thanked her, and the ladies went away.

Mrs. Faringdon smiled complacently at Lady Chilcomb.

"I think I've put a spoke in the lady's wheel, if she thought she could inveigle Miles into marrying her now that he is to be a baronet," she said. "Of course, people of that sort always think a man with a title must be rich."

"I suppose so," said Lady Chilcomb musingly. "But, do you know, I am beginning to think there's something genuine about that woman."

CHAPTER XXIII

A HEROINE IN MUFTI

MRS. FARINGDON was indignant. It was hard enough to have to marry her beautiful daughter to a man who, although his position had now improved somewhat by the death of his brother, was poor, and likely to be very little better off for the term of his natural life. But to find her sister-in-law appearing to side with the adventuress, who had made even this poor match doubtful of fulfilment, was almost more than the much-tried mother could put up with.

“Genuine!” she echoed in amazement, as she stared at Lady Chilcomb with an offended air. “You call a woman genuine who lives and moves in such a very dubious atmosphere as that in which Miss Maristow moves?”

But Lady Chilcomb stood her ground.

“Well, as to the atmosphere being dubious,” she said slowly, “I admit that she has been consorting with persons of poor reputation. But we can’t be sure that it was not for the reason she herself has given, that she wanted to find out what had become of my jewels.”

Mrs. Faringdon trembled with indignation. She was not, however, in a position to quarrel with the Viscountess, who shed some prestige over her, and who had been generous in her forgiveness of the peccant Ruby. So she controlled her feelings and answered soberly, though the angry look in her eyes belied her soft words.

"Dear Harriet," she said, "you are always so good-natured, so ready to make the best of everybody! But I am afraid that in this instance your generosity is misplaced. Miss Maristow certainly did not give me the impression of a sincere and injured woman."

"She did not give me the impression of thinking herself an injured woman, certainly. But at the same time, I think she is sincere. She confessed so much more than she need have done. At any rate, I am only stating my own impressions. Of course, I may be wrong."

"And if she is the injured innocent she appears to wish to make herself out to be, how do you account for her turning out to have so much money?"

"Has she so much money?"

Mrs. Faringdon began to feel impatient, though she dared not show it.

"She had dresses as handsome as anyone about here. She wears good jewellery. Do you think these thieves would have suffered her to keep it, if she had not been one of themselves?"

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The question was a difficult one, and Lady Chilcomb, used to having her own way in a discussion, frowned.

"Of course," went on Mrs. Faringdon hastily, "she may have been robbed also, but she certainly gave no indication of the fact. And then she talked of having a detective brought over here; or Miles Haldon did. You can't do that sort of thing without money. Now, when she was staying at Monte Carlo she certainly did not appear to have much superfluous cash. People don't usually dress in dowdy clothes and live in second-rate boarding-houses, when they can indulge in luxuries. I only want your opinion; I am not pressing my own."

Lady Chilcomb, however, was not ready with anything more definite in the way of an opinion than the one she had already expressed. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Well," she said, "it really doesn't matter, does it? Since Miles is safely away in England, you can arrange matters without him, can't you?"

"I don't understand."

"I mean you can take the opportunity afforded by our having opened negotiations with Miss Maristow to get her out of the way. It ought not to be difficult. She seems quite to acquiesce in Ruby's engagement, and therefore the sooner that is ratified the better."

Mrs. Faringdon looked perplexed.

"You speak," said she, "rather as if you didn't think it would come off."

"Well, I think it will want some 'working.' Miles doesn't seem so keen as he was, does he?"

"We couldn't expect him to be very affectionate or very eager when he has been so much upset by his brother's illness and then by his death. Really, Harriet, you are not encouraging. I thought you wanted Ruby to marry him!"

"I think it is the best that could happen to *her*, but she has made it difficult for us to say the same for him. When he was mad about her, she behaved rather heartlessly, and told him that, while it was pleasant enough to flirt with him, it wouldn't do for her to marry him. She nearly broke his heart. He used to talk of making away with himself, and I don't feel at all sure myself that he didn't try."

"What!"

"You remember that he had a mysterious accident in the grounds of the casino at Monte Carlo one night?"

"It was an accident, wasn't it?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. But people don't usually carry revolvers about with them, and if they do, they generally know how to handle them. If he was playing with a revolver in the grounds, I think myself, it was dangerous play."

Mrs. Faringdon, though she pretended to be

surprised, had had her own doubts upon this subject, too. So, indeed, had other people.

"I certainly don't think, if he was so foolish and wicked as to attempt his own life, that my poor Ruby ought to be blamed for it," she said indignantly. "He used to gamble, and he lost his money. I think, if he did try to commit suicide, it was most likely through his losses."

"I never heard of his playing high until he got the silly idea into his head that he could make money that way to marry upon," said Lady Chilcomb. "However, it is certain Ruby did not treat him well, and, though I don't want to revive unpleasant memories, it must be admitted that she has done things which might well make a man feel shy of marrying her."

Mrs. Faringdon, who had known this must come, was trembling until her comfortable three chins shook and her voice quivered and cracked.

"She wanted money only to help him with, I'm certain," said she. "And it is like a man to throw the blame upon the woman."

"But he hasn't done so. He has borne it all himself. Really, I think if I were you I would swallow pride and ask Miss Maristow's help to bring about the marriage between Ruby and Miles."

"Ask—an adventuress—to help me!" cried Mrs. Faringdon, aghast.

"I'm not at all sure that it isn't the only

chance of bringing it about," said Lady Chilcomb with increasing decision. "Undoubtedly there is some mystery about Miss Maristow. But she is a woman to be reckoned with and, if possible, to be gained over to one's side. Miles thinks the world of her, there's no doubt."

"You don't surely believe there's any danger of his throwing prudence to the winds, and marrying her?"

"I don't know about the prudence of it, but I think it's very likely to come off if you're not careful."

Mrs. Faringdon groaned. She felt that her sister-in-law was betraying her own side in the most shameless manner.

And if she had heard Lady Chilcomb's clear and straightforward account of their visit to the villa, and her opinions of Miss Maristow, poor Mrs. Faringdon would have been still more deeply distressed.

For what the Viscountess said to her husband, in the privacy of their own apartments, was this :

"My dear Ralph, I never was so much struck with the straightforwardness and honesty of a person of my own sex before. Miss Maristow spoke as if every word she uttered came straight from her heart. And really, though I suppose she isn't what one ought to call strictly handsome, there's a sort of refinement of feeling in her face which might make me think, if Miles were

my son, that I would rather he married Miss Maristow than that little empty-headed, greedy flirt, Ruby."

Not unnaturally the Viscount deprecated such strong terms applied to their niece, but thought there was something to be said for his wife's opinion.

In the meantime there had been important developments in connection with the thieves of the villa, and with the discovery of the safe.

This, when opened, proved to contain not only all but one of the ornaments stolen from Jane Maristow's person by Verdello and d'Abbeville, but a quantity of other valuable jewellery, most of which was before long identified as stolen from hotels on the Riviera, the railway and other places.

It was already abundantly clear to the police that they had made a very important capture, no less indeed than the members of a gang who had for years eluded the vigilance of the authorities in France and the borders of Italy.

Changing their headquarters constantly, and behaving with a mixture of caution and daring which had baffled the cleverest detectives, these swindlers had reaped an abundant harvest during the few months of the Riviera season, and had then lain low for a time, reappearing only when the chances of a good haul tempted them out of hiding.

They were far too astute ever to endanger themselves by offering their spoils for sale too soon ; as they had explained to Jane, their practice was to let the memory of a robbery die down before making any attempt to dispose of the proceeds. By this means, instead of being obliged to wrench the precious stones from their settings and sell them for whatever they could get, they were enabled to dispose of the whole ornaments, later, in some quarter of the world remote from the scene of the actual theft, at a highly remunerative price. Patience, like virtue, has its reward.

Who was the real leader of the band the police did not at once discover. The two men they had caught were for a long time extremely reticent ; and it was not until rage at their betrayal by Madame Blanche opened their lips that they confessed that she was the moving spirit of the gang.

Their word was, however, not implicitly to be relied upon, and the police were inclined to think that this was scarcely the truth, and that the distinction of being the actual head of the organisation probably belonged rather to Verdello himself.

However this might be, there was no doubt that the capture of the two men was a feat to be proud of ; and Cross, having made friends with the local authorities, told them of the courageous course taken by Miss Maristow in conjunction with himself, and of the risks she had run in her

determination to recover, if she could, property which had been stolen from her person, but of which she was not the owner.

The affair caused the greatest excitement. Many were anxious to hush it up, for fear that the ugly story of Ruby's theft of her aunt's jewels should be brought up again, to the detriment of the girl. But it was, of course, impossible to hope that the important news could be suppressed, so that, though the version which obtained currency was a somewhat garbled one, leaving gaps to be supplied by the imagination or by special knowledge, it soon became known that the unfortunate Englishwoman who had been arrested for theft and then discharged was really a heroine, and the person to whom belonged the credit of bringing the gang to justice.

She had, of course, been moved as soon as possible from the villa, which these occurrences had rendered notorious, and placed in a hotel at Nice, where she was constantly visited by Lady Chilcomb, whose delight and gratitude on learning the whole truth it would be difficult to describe.

Mrs. Faringdon, indeed, came also to see Jane, but her congratulations were necessarily less genuine than those of her sister-in-law.

Ruby herself came once to see Miss Maristow; but although the girl was very effusive, she made a poor impression upon the straightforward and honest-hearted Jane, who could have wished for

a nobler type of woman for the wife of Miles Haldon.

In the meantime, it was inevitable that the discovery of her diamond cross among the jewels in the safe should give rise to more questions. An official list having come out with the description of all the jewels found, and an estimate of their value, it of course became generally known that a diamond cross, valued at eight hundred pounds, belonging to Miss Maristow, was among them.

And then again arose the questions as to the origin of the mysterious wealth of the English-woman, whose experiences on the Riviera had been so puzzling to others and so unpleasant to herself.

Jane would say nothing whatever to clear up the mystery. She had begun by this time to feel some pleasure in mystifying the ladies, and especially the greedy Mrs. Faringdon, who was unable to account for this unsuspected wealth in a manner which she found satisfactory.

The mysterious Jane, in the meantime, had sent to England for her solicitor, and Mr. Ritchie duly arrived while she was still only convalescent.

Ill as she then looked, the change in her circumstances had made such a great and permanent change in the appearance of the fortunate Jane that Mr. Ritchie did not at first recognise in the beautifully gowned and graceful woman, with the soft eyes and the elaborately-dressed hair, the plain, dowdy, haggard woman who had shuffled

into his office but a few short months ago, to hear with a sort of stupid bewilderment, tempered with suspicion, the news that she was heiress to her unknown relation's money.

Mr. Ritchie looked at Jane, and Jane laughed and blushed and looked down with not unbecoming shyness.

"May I congratulate you?" said he kindly, as he took her hand.

"Thank you," said Jane in a stifled voice. "Yes, I understand. The change to me has meant much more than I thought it would."

"It is not change," said Mr. Ritchie simply. "It is—transformation."

"That is what I am afraid you will insist on," she said quite gaily, "when you hear why I have sent for you. You found me so diffident, so mean, that I was reluctant to take a hansom instead of an omnibus. You are going to say to-day, when you hear why I have sent for you—at least, if you are too courteous to say it, you will mean it—that I have become transformed into the most quixotic and hopelessly lavish idiot of your acquaintance."

"Indeed, I hope not."

"Yes, you will. Mr. Ritchie, the inevitable has happened. I, who never before had so much as the breath of romance in my life, have in my middle age—"

"No, no, if you will allow me to interrupt you, you are not middle-aged at thirty-two. I might

have let your statement pass once, but you have been dipped in the spring of a new youth since then."

A curious light passed over Jane's face as he uttered these words. They pleased her, not as an empty compliment would have done, but because she recognised that, whether intentionally or not, they were nothing but the truth. The grey dawn of her life had been succeeded by a noon at least tinged with rose, and even the sufferings and trials she had gone through of late had not counterbalanced her vague, undefined joy in her own discovery of some of the sources of joy in life.

"Well, let us hope you won't say, in five minutes' time, that I've got a second childhood. Mr. Ritchie, I've fought a long time against the fact, but now I have to recognise that I'm in love."

"Quite what I expected," murmured Mr. Ritchie.

"But," interrupted Jane severely, "I'm not so foolish as to give way to the feeling altogether. I don't intend to marry the man I own I love——"

"But why in Heaven's name shouldn't you?"

"He is younger than I am," said Jane with decision. "And I'm too old not to understand what that would mean in the future——"

"But might it not—excuse my interrupting—might it not mean also a very good time in the present?"

She waved her hand.

"I have decided," she said. "Well, as I love this man, I want him to be happy, not with me, but with the right woman—the woman he loves."

"Ah, I see. That is very generous of you."

"He is poor and so is she. I want to make it possible for him to marry without a constant struggle. I want you to find out a way of handing over to him twenty thousand pounds without having the least idea where it comes from."

Mr. Ritchie looked aghast. Then, however, he slightly shrugged his shoulders, and bowed his head to intimate that he was ready to hear the full details of the mad plan.

Quite simply she told him enough of the history of her acquaintance with Miles Haldon for him to understand something of the footing they were on. She expected to find him more than ever opposed to her plan as she went on with her story. But Mr. Ritchie was an exceedingly shrewd man and presently, instead of objecting, tacitly or openly, to her plan, he began to take a different course, and to help her on with her narrative by sympathetic questions and remarks, until little by little she had told him much more than she intended ; indeed, practically he had elicited the whole story.

And then, much to her relief, but equally to

her surprise, instead of persisting in his objections to her plan, he fell in with her views, or appeared to do so, and gave all his mind to helping her to carry them out.

Of course, the idea she wished was difficult to realise. One suggestion after another he made, only to reject it later, until at last he proposed that he should represent that the money was a legacy from an old lady who had met him at the casino tables, and to whom he had been kind.

This seemed a possible plan, and Jane agreed to it, authorising him to make all haste to carry it out for her and making him undertake never, in any circumstances, to divulge the source whence the money came.

Then, with a vague sense of unrest, she let Mr. Ritchie go and sat down alone to debate whether, after all, she were really doing the best thing possible for Miles in encouraging a match with a girl whom she herself could not respect, and for whom his own affection seemed to have waned.

But she was such a romantic believer in the faith that a man's first instinctive choice is the best for him, that she put her fears aside, and, with a little sigh, told herself that, at any rate, if he were not perfectly happy in the future, Miles would be the more prosperous for her unsuspected gift.

CHAPTER XXIV

PAID OFF AT LAST

NEARLY a fortnight after the affair at the villa Miles Haldon came back to Nice. He had brought his mother with him, it having been thought that the change would do her good after the strain and the distress of her son's illness and death.

Jane, meanwhile, was enjoying life thoroughly for the first time.

Viscount and Lady Chilcomb could not do enough to show their gratitude to her for the courage and address she had shown, and the expense to which she had put herself in getting on the track of the jewel thieves, and effecting the restoration of the lady's diamonds.

Certainly their relations, Mrs. Faringdon and her daughter Ruby, did not show so much alacrity in making friends with Miss Maristow. The girl, indeed, made a show of conciliating Jane, and Mrs. Faringdon asked her to forgive her if she had seemed unkind before she learned the sacrifices Miss Maristow had made in track-

ing out the lost jewels. But the attempts on both sides to patch up a friendship were half-hearted, for Jane was not a good actress, and though she tried hard to be at her ease with the mother and daughter, she found it difficult to pretend to like either of them.

She began to doubt greatly whether Miles Haldon would be happy with the spoilt beauty for a wife; but after all, that was his affair, not hers; and if he should decide not to marry her, Jane would be sorry in a way for his inconstancy, but glad, on the other, that he would be free to make a better choice.

At any rate, when once he was in possession of the capital she was anonymously placing at his disposal, he would be independent and able to make his own decision.

Not once did it occur to Jane to doubt whether she had done wisely in leaving the disposal of the money at the absolute discretion of Miles.

It was suggested to her by Mr. Ritchie that she should make some stipulation that the money was to be invested, and not gambled away. But Jane, with a deep blush, refused to have any condition attached to her gift, and said briefly that she would not make it to any man whom she could not trust to make a proper use of it.

"It is quite true," she added simply, "that Mr. Haldon has not always been very wise in

he past. But I feel sure this little bit of good fortune will steady him, and that there need be no fear that he will make other than a right use of the money."

So the business was transacted as she desired, and Jane had the satisfaction of learning from Mr. Ritchie, before Haldon left England on his return to the Riviera, that Miles had received the news of the proposed change in his fortunes, and that he had appeared absolutely overwhelmed by it.

It surprised Jane that no mention of this matter passed the lips of Lady Chilcomb, whom he now saw every day. It was getting very hot at Nice, and there was a general decision on the part of everyone to leave the place within a few days. But no word escaped Lady Chilcomb as to any change in the plans of Miles, or of any event having happened of particular interest to anybody.

It was on a sunny afternoon, when the heat was too great to be endured in comfort out-of-doors, that Jane was sitting in an easy-chair close to the window of her sitting-room, musing regretfully on the fact that she must be thinking of joining the general exodus and resume her lonely life again.

Where should she go?

Lady Chilcomb had cordially expressed the wish that she would spend the season in London,

and had promised to introduce her to some pleasant people, and to help her to enjoy that society from which Jane confessed that she had lived apart for most of her life.

Jane was, of course, still an enigma to her new friends. They could not reconcile the dowdy spinster of the second-rate boarding-house at Monte Carlo with the well-dressed woman who could afford jewellery and rooms in a good hotel at Nice.

But they were too discreet to ask questions, and Lady Chilcomb, grateful for what Jane had done for her, was not disposed to cavil at what she now regarded merely as harmless eccentricities. No idea appeared to have entered anybody's head that Miss Maristow was really a very wealthy woman. There was something so shy, so subdued, about her still, that they were more inclined to think that she had a competence, and that circumstances—*pique* at being suspected of theft perhaps—had conduced to a short spell of extravagance on her part, for which she might have to pay by pinching herself afterwards.

Jane's cheek was resting on her hand, and her book was lying unread in her lap, when the door opened and a waiter asked if Mr. Haldon could see her.

The blood rushed into Jane's cheeks, and she found it difficult to hide every trace of the violent excitement which possessed her as she told the man to show Mr. Haldon upstairs.

A few moments later Miles, very pale and thin in the face, and trembling like a schoolboy, came in.

Both were very shy as they shook hands, and a horrible fear seized her that he had found out who had sent him the mysterious fortune.

His first greeting, however, dispelled that notion.

"I am so glad," he said, "you have not gone. I have to tell you of a most astonishing thing that happened to me while I was in England."

"Indeed," said Jane, her voice shaking.

"Yes. It's so surprising, so amazing, that I don't know whether I shall ever induce you to believe it."

"I should certainly not doubt anything that you might tell me, Miles."

She was beginning to recover her composure a little, but he did not recover his. Indeed, it seemed that he grew more incoherent and more bashful as he went on.

"I've had a fortune left me."

"Indeed! I'm very glad to hear it."

"Not by my poor brother," he went on, thinking perhaps that she had misunderstood him. "By a woman I scarcely ever spoke to. Isn't that hard to believe?"

It was. Jane was astonished. Evidently he was quite on the wrong track. She had been even more successful in her stratagem than she had expected.

He resumed :

" I've had twenty thousand pounds left me by an old lady who used to haunt the tables at Monte Carlo, and whom I've helped to get to her place at the table once or twice, and in little ways like that. And now she's left me a fortune. Isn't it amazing? "

" Yes, indeed. And what is her name? "

" I can't even tell you that. The money was left to me on condition that I was not to make any inquiries, but just to take it as a sort of gift from Heaven."

" Why, it's quite romantic! " said Jane.

" It's rather uncanny, " said Miles soberly. " If only I had known her name it wouldn't have been so bad. But the solicitor was quite firm about that; I was not to know it."

" I don't see that it matters much, if there is no doubt about the money, " said Jane.

He frowned a little.

" I can't agree with you. The idea haunts me that perhaps I've made a mistake after all. But I don't see how that can be. I went over all the people I'd ever met who could do such a thing, and the only conclusion I could come to was that it was the old lady. Odd, isn't it? "

" Well, it's rather a nice sort of oddness."

" It may be. I don't know. It all depends, " said Miles.

" On what? "

"On whether I can do what I like with it."

"I thought you said you could?"

"No, I didn't. I've come here to-day to ask."

Jane, violently startled, made a rapid gesture, and he looked at her earnestly.

"It all depends," he said, "on whether I can do the thing I want to do with my money."

"And what is that?"

"Whether I can induce the woman I love to marry me."

Then she understood. Miles suddenly lost his shyness and came close to her, and looked eagerly into her face, and she saw in his eyes the truth that she had tried to be blind to.

"Come, Jane, it's time we put an end to all misunderstanding," he said. "Tell me whether you will help me to spend it. Don't you love me enough? Don't you, dear?"

Jane burst into tears. She did not know exactly why, except that some emotion seemed to be tearing her heart asunder.

And all of a sudden her prudence and caution disappeared. She stammered out:

"It was to help you marry—not me, but Ruby!"

And then she saw she had betrayed herself.

Miles sprang to his feet, his face aflame, his eyes starting out of his head, his limbs shaking.

"What! You! Oh, God!"

And, struggling for breath, he gradually edged

away from her and, suddenly turning with a sort of groan, rushed out of the room.

Jane would have called him, but for shame dared not. She knew that her own want of caution had revealed her secret, knew that he was aware now who was the anonymous donor of the fortune, knew that he was indebted to her for it all.

She cried with vexation at her folly, and then she continued to cry for very joy at his having come to her to ask her to share his fortune.

What was she afraid of? Why was she miserable at one moment, and madly happy the next? She could not have told. She only felt as if her whole nature had been torn up by the roots, and as if she could never look Miles Haldon in the face again.

After a time she grew more composed, told herself that after all there was no great harm done, that since he had owned he loved her before he knew her to be the giver of the fortune, he would go on loving her afterwards.

But she could not feel sure of this. Ever diffident, she now began to torment herself with the notion that perhaps he might resent her action, think she had made a fool of him, and that he might even go the length of refusing to accept that which she had bestowed upon him.

She was in a fever by the time there was another announcement, and Lady Chilcomb was

ushered into the room together with little Mrs. Haldon, Miles's mother.

The poor little mother looked piteously sad in her deep mourning for her son; but the tears which were still in her eyes, and which coursed freely down her cheeks during the interview, were not those of grief.

She was hysterical and incoherent, and it was Lady Chilcomb who told Jane that they had both heard the wonderful news from Miles of the gift she had made to him, and that they had come to thank her for her generosity, and to apologise for their reception of her in the old days.

Then Mrs. Haldon, finding her voice, said in broken tones:

“Dear Miss Maristow, I hope you’ll forgive me. You’ve done so much for my dear boy that I do pray you won’t refuse to marry him. He has been talking of no one but you ever since he heard the money had been, as he thought, left to him. And, indeed, we should all be deeply disappointed if you wouldn’t give us the opportunity of showing our gratitude to you.”

Jane was almost as much agitated as she.

“I don’t know what to say for shame,” she said. “But the truth is I have brought all these troubles upon myself, through my ignorance of the world, and my diffidence and mistrust of myself. I had been very poor all my life, when I suddenly came into a large fortune, and I hardly

know how to realise the fact even now. I am ashamed and sorry I let Miles know how the money came to him. But the truth is, I was so much touched when he told me he still wanted to marry me that I lost my balance, and didn't know what I said. And it seemed to come to him suddenly that—that—it was I who had done this thing. Tell me, is he offended? Deeply offended? When he ran out of the room I called him back and he wouldn't come."

"I think he was too much overwhelmed. He said he didn't know for the moment where he was, and that he couldn't trust himself to speak or even to look at you," said Mrs. Haldon.

Jane laid her long hand on the little plump one of Miles's mother.

"Wouldn't it have been better," she asked earnestly, "for him to marry Ruby?"

Lady Chilcomb interrupted her with a laugh even before Mrs. Haldon could reply.

"No, decidedly it would not," she said. "Ruby doesn't deserve to marry him, and besides, he doesn't want to marry her. She only flirted with him. Although she is my niece, and I am sorry, in a way, that the match is off, I recognise that it would be impossible now, and useless for us to say anything to him. You had better make up your mind to be happy, Miss Maristow, as you deserve to be."

Jane turned away, and looked, through swim-

ming eyes, towards the blue sea shimmering in the sunshine. It seemed to her, as she sat in a sort of dream, wondering what was going to happen next and whether she ought to allow herself to be happy, that she heard a certain amount of subdued commotion and even whispering in the room behind her.

But she would not look round until she had furtively wiped her eyes and pulled herself together, as it were.

Then she did turn and, to her amazement and confusion, she found that the two ladies had disappeared, and that in their place, evidently by pre-arrangement, stood Miles Haldon.

He was flushed, excited, and happy, and was laughing like a boy. He had no intention of being put off this time, for without more ado he came close to her, took her in his arms and, swinging her round towards him, kissed her on the lips.

"Now then," said he in a deep bass voice of surprising volume and determination, "what trick are you going to play me next?"

"Oh, Miles, don't. I can't marry you, indeed."

"All right. I can't force a woman to marry me against her will. But, by Jove! if you don't, why then you must take back the money. I don't mind a bit taking money from the woman who is to be my wife—in fact I rather like it,—but I refuse to take it from anybody else. So you

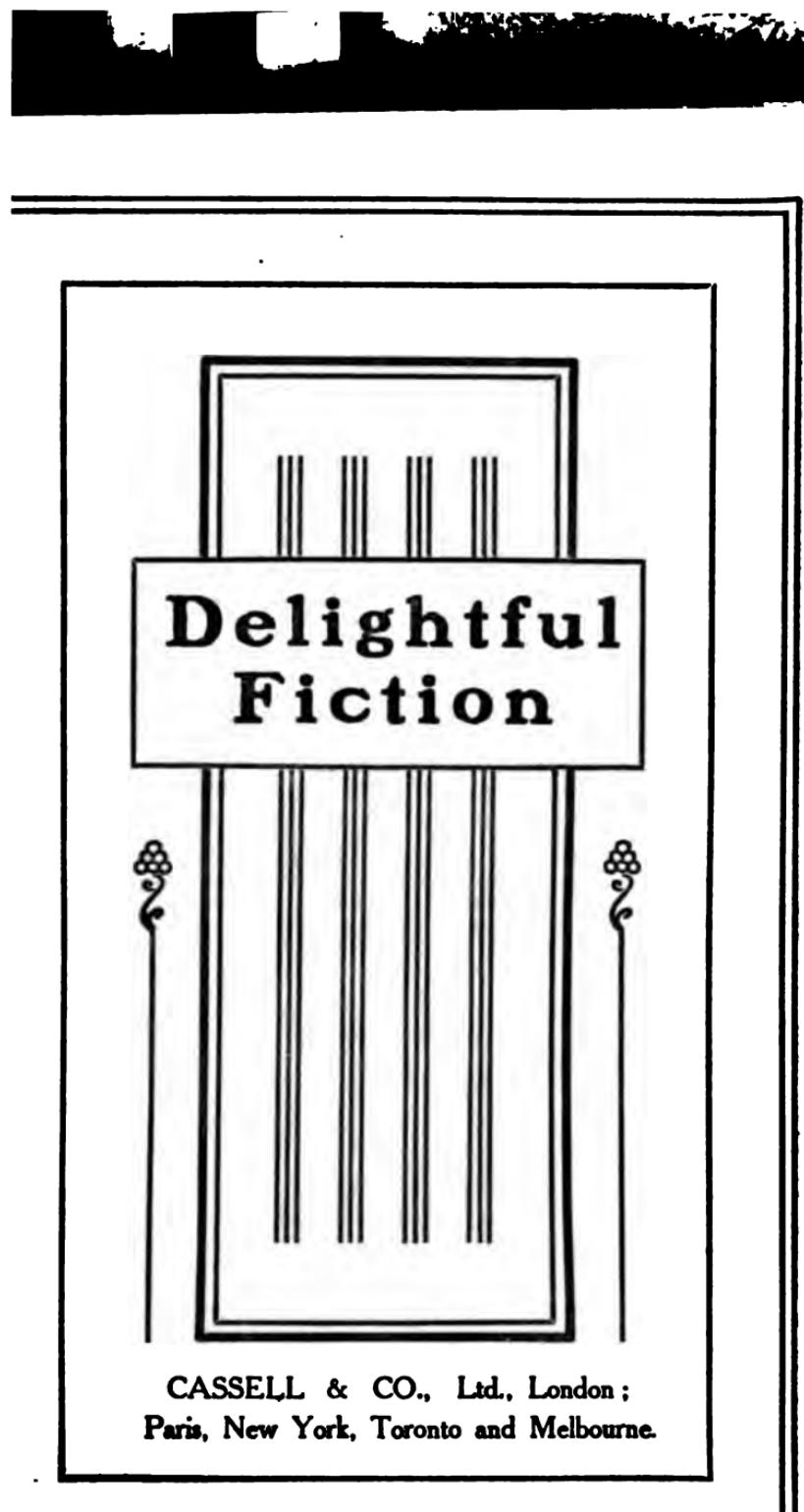
must make your choice. You must either give the twenty thousand pounds and take the husband, or else take back the twenty thousand pounds and let him go."

Jane gave a long-drawn sigh.

"I'll take him, then," she said, "if I must. But oh! we shall be so miserable. In a few years' time, the novelty will have worn off and I shall be looking old while you're still young."

"Look here," said Miles cheerfully, as he rested his hand upon her shoulder, "it may be as you say. But I am willing to risk it. Wouldn't it be better to go through the world together, enjoying each the society of the being one loves, than for you to go away and be lonely, and for me to go away—and marry a girl I don't care for? Ah! Jane, tell me that."

Jane trembled. Had all those arrears of happiness which she had missed during the dreary years of her early life come rolling to her feet together to be paid off at last? She thought so as, with a gentle sigh, she accepted his reasoning and laid her head on his breast.



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